SHORT STORIES

No. 780.] Week ending December 12. 1903. [Price One Penny.

THE BURGLAR HAD LOCKED HER TRESSES 'TWIXT THE WARDROBE DOORS. WOULD SHE ESCAPE IN TIME?

(A Thrilling Incident from the Powerful Story, "A Modern Burnt-offering." See inside.)

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Short Stories

No. 780.] [One Penny.

Week Ending December 12th, 1903.

A MODERN BURNT-OFFERING.

Telling of the Heroic Deed of a Brave Girl.

Containing the Incident Depicted on the Cover.

It was morning, and the golden sun streamed in through the open windows of the pretty breakfast-room and fell upon silver and glass and snowy table-linen.

The morning post had just been delivered, and Arthur Garth and his sister Minnie were dividing their attention between breakfast and their respective correspondence. There was another and much more bulky letter-box downstairs, for the apartments were immediately over the great East India Bank, of which Arthur Garth was resident manager, but these could wait till business hours began and the bank threw open its heavy swing-doors for the day. To judge from the unruffled expression of Arthur Garth's face, there was nothing either important or remarkable in his correspondence. But his sister Minnie was more fortunate, and, strangely enough, the pleasure she evinced over the perusal of one dainty little note seemed, when its purport became known to him, to communicate its influence to him also.

"Arthur," she said, looking up from the letter with a sly little twinkle in her blue eyes—"Arthur, what do you think? I have asked an old school friend to come and stay with me for a week or two, and she is coming."

Arthur looked across at his sister and a flush mounted to his brow as he asked:

"Not Faith—I mean Miss Allardyce?"

Minnie laughed—a silvery, rippling laugh that appeared to add to her brother's embarrassment. But he was forced to laugh too—her mirth was so infectious.

"You poor old boy," she said banteringly, "you can't hide anything from me. Well, dear"—and her voice softened and dropped to a tone of infinite tenderness and affection—"I knew you would be pleased, so I thought I would give you a little surprise.

"You know, Arthur"—and the voice grew still more soft—"there is simply nothing so dear to me as your happiness. You have been father and mother and brother to me ever since our dear ones were taken from us, and the life that might otherwise have been solitary and sad, has been joyous and happy, because of the love and care you have always given me.

"And now—now that your own happiness depends on the winning of dear little Faith Allardyce—for, though you have not confided in me, I know this to be so—it is my turn to help you in the attainment of that wish."

Arthur Garth left his seat and went round the breakfast-table towards his sister. The latter rose as he approached, and he put his arms about her slender figure.

"Minnie," he said as he drew her face to his and kissed it; "I am lucky in having such a sweet sister as you. You have guessed rightly, dear.

"I love Faith Allardyce very dearly—more dearly than I can tell, even to you.

"I am very, very glad that you have asked her to visit you here, and I hope before she goes back home, that I shall hear from her own lips the answer I so ardently desire. But"—and he kissed her again—"my sister will be none the less dear to me, or important to my happiness, when a wife shall claim my first love. Our mother's dying trust to me to care for you—my friend as well as sister—shall never be forgotten, even if this happiest dream of my life be realised. Nor can I ever regard that sacred trust in the light of a duty—though duty it undoubtedly is—since its fulfilment affords me too much pleasure to be viewed in any other light than that as an honour, a privilege, and a real and lasting happiness."

There were tears in Minnie's eyes as she lifted them to her brother's face.

"Dear old boy," she said lovingly, "your assurances are very sweet to me, though I do not need them. I cannot think of you other than as the best and kindest of men."

Arthur pinched her cheek.

"Such views change," he said banteringly. "Your turn may come some day."

Minnie laughed, and then blushed prettily, as she disengaged herself from her brother's embrace.

"By the way," she said, "shall I put Faith in the room next mine?"

Arthur considered for a moment.

"No," he said at last. "My room is by far the most comfortable. Cannot you make the necessary transfers and put her there? And I could have the room next yours."

Minnie nodded.

"Just the thing," she said. "I'll see to it to-day. She is coming to-morrow, you know." And, breakfast being over, she went out to superintend the transfer at once, while Arthur Garth went down the broad stairs to the bank below to commence the business of the day.

That day and the next seemed long to ardent Arthur Garth. But at last they drew to an end, and, mounting the stairs from the bank at the close of the second day, he found his sister and their fair visitor chatting pleasantly together over old associations.

Faith Allardyce rose as he entered, and a soft pink blush heightened the colour of her cheek as he greeted her and gave her cordial welcome to their home.

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She was exquisitely lovely, with large hazel eyes and delicate complexion.

Tall and slender, and with that graceful ease of carriage that lends both dignity and distinction to the figure, Faith Allardyce was as sweet and perfect a type of womanhood as one could wish to see. But the greatest attraction of all was her hair. No one could see her without remarking both its beauty and abundance. Indeed, so luxuriant was it, that she had allowed her adherence to transitory fashion to lapse altogether, and habitually wound it, coil upon coil, above her gracefully poised head. Its hue was chestnut, but, whenever the sun caught it, it glowed and glistened like threads of fine-spun gold. It had a trick, too, of clustering in coy little curls above her low brow and about her small, shell-like ears in a manner which Arthur Garth thought positively bewitching. Nor was he at all prejudiced, for if ever that old saying was true, it assuredly was in the case of Faith Allardyce: "A woman's crowning glory is her hair." And Faith was not ignorant of the fact.

"Well, Mr. Garth," she said, "have you unburdened yourself of the business of the day?"

"Yes," replied Arthur, "and the process of 'unburdening' has been associated with more pleasure than I ever remember to have been the case before."

For a moment Faith was oblivious to the compliment implied.

"Does that mean that the day's business has been satisfactory or otherwise?" she asked. "The inference is a little vague."

Arthur smiled and looked out of the window.

"I am afraid it is," he said, with a humorous twinkle in his dark eyes. "And explanations are tiresome. But, really, Miss Allardyce, the day's business has been eminently satisfactory."

Faith looked into his face. And then the implied compliment in his first remark came home to her, and she blushed prettily, and turned away her eyes. Minnie, with true feminine perception, noticed her embarrassment and changed the conversation.

"Any of the directors been in to-day?" she asked.

Arthur nodded.

"They seem very satisfied," he said. "But there is to be one slight alteration—only a temporary one—for which there is a good and substantial reason."

"What is that?" asked Minnie.

"Mr. Dixon is to sleep on the premises for the next week or so," he replied gravely. And then, as Minnie still looked inquisitive, he added: "I am not at liberty to explain, dear. All I need say is that my present responsibilities are greatly augmented, and that the arrangement I have just referred to is the outcome of my own personal request."

Minnie sighed. She understood now. The bank strong-room had need of a second protector. The same thing had happened before, and Minnie always felt nervous at such times. But she made no further remark and allowed the subject to drop.

"I suppose you are likely to remain here for some time to come, Mr. Garth?" said Faith interrogatively.

"Yes, I expect so," was the reply. "There will be a vacancy in the head office a few months hence, owing to the present manager's intended retirement. But the post is too far removed from that which I now occupy to warrant even the hope of my appointment to it. There is some difference between seven hundred and fifty and fifteen hundred a year!"

Faith nodded.

"Rather!" she said. "But I thought you were ambitious, Mr. Garth?"

Arthur laughed.

"So I believe I am," he said.

Faith opened her eyes wide in affected surprise.

"An ambitious man—with no hope!" she said. "Isn't that something of a paradox?"

But Arthur was not easy to put down.

"I think not," he said smiling. "It is often the best policy for an ambitious man to realise the *present* hopelessness of some achievements, in order that he may devote all his energies to the attainment of lesser and humbler eminences, from which the ultimate height may be more easy to reach. In crossing the river, it is always unwise, in our desire to set foot on the opposite shore, to forget the next stepping-stone."

There was an admiring light in Faith's hazel eyes, to which she endeavoured to give the lie.

"Oh, you plodder!" she said with assumed impatience. "Well, I am more sanguine than you. My name is Faith, you know, and I believe you will get that appointment."

"Can't you make me believe it, too?" Arthur asked, a light dancing in his eyes. "I might do lots of things if that came true." And he looked ardently into the bright animated face of the girl before him.

Faith caught the glance and turned her head away.

"You should try," she said. "'All things are possible,' you know."

Arthur's heart beat fast as he listened to the words. "All things are possible!" Well, he would put one possibility to the test before the week was out. Of that he was determined.

* * * * *

It was three days later.

They had sat late over supper, and it was midnight when Faith Allardyce retired to the pretty little room which Minnie had assigned to her. But, late as it was, she did not go to bed. The day had been damp and chilly, and Minnie had ordered a fire to be lit in their visitor's room, before which Faith sat in idle meditation. She had disrobed herself ready for the night, and, attiring herself in a dainty dressing-gown, sat herself down in a deep-seated easy-chair before the grateful glow of the fire. There were many things to think about. Her holiday in the great Metropolis, the sights she saw, so strangely unfamiliar to her provincial eyes, the gaiety and bustle of the great city, the pleasant renewal of old-time friendship with her school-mate, Minnie, and, last, but not least, the evident admiration of her handsome brother Arthur.

The very thought of him caused Faith Allardyce to blush. She was not a simpering school-girl, affecting what she did not feel, or denying what she did. She had read her heart in these last few days, and knew, without question or concealment, that she loved this Arthur Garth as she would love no other man.

And she knew, too, that he loved her. The thought was pregnant with sweetness, and she sat there before the red fire, dwelling on the realisation, too happy to break the spell which that realisation had woven about her. How long she sat there she did not know, but, thinking her happy thoughts, she fell asleep.

She started into consciousness with the sound of someone moving about the room. Springing from her chair, she faced round, and, at the sight she saw, put her hand quickly to her heart with a convulsive catch at her throat. The electric light was still turned on, and by its light she saw the tall figure of a masked man close behind her, with the barrel of a grim revolver pointed at her breast. She could feel the night wind coming in through the open window, and knew instinctively that it was there the man had entered. She reeled, and would have cried out, but the voice of the armed man stopped her.

"If you utter a sound" he said, in a low, threatening tone, "I will shoot you as I would a bird!"

She cowered down in the chair and tried to think.

"I've made a little mistake, that's all," went on the man under his breath. "I thought this was Mr. Garth's room. The fact is"—and the mouth broadened into a cruel grin beneath the mask—"the fact is, I want to have a word or two with Mr. Garth on—er—important business."

Faith shivered. She understood now. Arthur's hint about augmented responsibilities recurred to her. Oh, what was she to do?

"Well," resumed the man, "I can't waste my time here, and it's equally evident I can't leave you without first taking some little precaution to insure your silence."

He looked down at her, and she, with terrified, startled eyes looked back at him.

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"The best way of doing that would be to—well, you know well enough what that is," he said calmly. "But you're awfully pretty, and I can't do it. Sentiment should never interfere with business, I know, but a man's a man, and a pretty woman makes a man a fool. But what can I do?"

Again he looked at her, and she, frightened, shrinking, terror-stricken, dropped her head upon her hands and hid her face from him. As she did so, the beautiful, long chestnut hair falling almost to her knees, attracted his attention.

"Ah!" he said, and looked about the room. Presently his eye fell on the big glass-panelled doors of a fine old wardrobe at one end of the room.

"The very thing!" he said. "Now then, miss, I am afraid I must trouble you to come with me. Do so without noise or resistance, and no harm shall come to you. But if you disobey my instructions or make the least sound, you must take the consequences."

He took her by the arm, and, lifting her up, led her over to the wardrobe. Reaching it, he took the long chestnut tresses in his hands and knotted it again and again at the end till it hung in a great clumsy knot some eighteen inches from her head. Then, opening one of the heavy doors of the wardrobe, he put the knot of hair within and shut the door to with a sharp thrust and turned the key in the lock.

"You can't follow me now," he said grimly, "and I'm going to take the key away with me. I might gag you if I wished, but I think you understand me well enough to know that, upon the slightest outcry, I would return, whatever the risk to myself, and take quick and summary vengeance on you for so doing. Don't forget!" And, with a cruel gleam in his dark, sinister eyes, he once more took out his revolver, picked up a dark lantern which lay on the table, and noiselessly left the room, closing the door behind him.

Faith Allardyce was alone.

Trembling with dread and apprehension, she tried to collect her scattered senses and think what she could do to save the man she loved. That he was in danger of his life, she knew now only too well.

She thought of him sleeping so soundly and peacefully, little dreaming of the terrible awakening that was soon to come. She pictured him opening his eyes to see the gleaming muzzle of that hideous revolver pressed against his temple and hearing that stern, peremptory demand for the keys of the bank strong-room. He would not yield, she knew, and then—then—oh, he would be murdered—murdered there in his bed.

The thought drove her almost frantic.

What could she do? She must do something! If nothing else occurred to her, she would scream for help, even though she paid the penalty with her own life. But was there no other way?

Her beautiful hair—the hair she, as well as others, had always admired so much—was holding her a prisoner and keeping her back from the man she loved. With starting eyes she looked about her for knife or scissors to cut through the lovely hair that bound her, but she could see neither, and her heart sank.

Then her eye fell on a long wax taper that lay within reach of her hand. A box of matches stood beside it, and a new idea flashed into her mind. Would there be time? She would try!

Snatching up the taper, she lit it, and, holding it behind her head, let the flame play among the strands of hair just where they were held by the doors of the wardrobe.

Her poor hair! Its beauty was being sacrificed now.

She could hear the hiss of singeing hair as the flame burnt its way steadily through the thick coil above it. But she gave no thought to the loss. Arthur Garth was in peril of his life, and that was all she could think of. And so the work of destruction went on, and at last she was free.

Springing to the door she opened it and looked along the dark passage. She thought she could see dimly in the distance, the figure of a man stooping to the lock of Arthur's door. A wide circle of light shone for an instant on the door, and she knew her sight had not deceived her.

The man had not heard her and she went stealthily down a transverse passage to the door of the room in which she knew Mr. Dixon had been put. Noiselessly she turned the handle, and, to her infinite relief, found the door unlocked. In she went, and, bending over the sleeping man, she silently roused him, and acquainted him with what was happening. Then, while Dixon leapt out of bed and hastily slipped on a few clothes, she stepped stealthily down the broad staircase of the bank, and, unshuttering a window, opened it and peered out into the dark, deserted street. Two or three moments and she heard the footstep of a passing police-constable. A stifled cry, and he was at her side. Another minute and he was through the open window and bounding up the stairs, while a great shout came from above, together with the sound of a desperate hand to hand encounter. It was Dixon and the burglar, and, just as the constable reached them, the burglar pointed the revolver full at his adversary's head. But the constable was too quick. With a blow from his truncheon, he knocked the weapon from his hand and it fell clattering to the floor.

At that moment the door of Arthur Garth's room was thrown open, and he stood amongst them, just aroused from sleep by the noise of the combat outside. A glance told him all, and the burglar was quickly under arrest. Dixon soon acquainted his chief with the manner in which he had been aroused, and Arthur Garth, looking down the dark passage, saw a slim white figure disappear within the doorway of her room.

"God bless her!" he murmured. "She has saved our lives, Dixon!"

Faith Allardyce did not appear at breakfast the following morning. Minnie had it conveyed to her room, and, soon after, went herself to see how her friend fared. She was closeted with her for a long time, and, when she came out, there was a suspicion of tears in her blue eyes. Her brother, waiting in vain for the appearance of the girl to whom he owed so much, was at last compelled to go downstairs to his office and begin the business of the day. There was a good deal of additional work for him that day—police investigations to satisfy, his presence in court, where his evidence, together with that of his subordinate, Dixon, was sworn to, and, finally, a full report of the proceedings to be drawn up and forwarded to the directors. But at last the day wore away to an end, and he went upstairs to his own quarters.

Somewhat to his surprise he found his sister absent. Faith was sitting on the couch, looking out of the window, and his heart beat fast as he approached her. She looked round as he entered, and a soft pink blush crept into her cheek.

"Minnie has run over to Mrs. Needham's," she said. "I expected her back before now, but I suppose something has detained her."

She wondered, as she said it, whether sly little Minnie had purposely delayed her return to allow for the *tête-à-tête* which was now impending. Arthur Garth sat down uninvited on the couch beside her.

"Miss Allardyce," he said in a low, earnest voice, "before I say anything else I must thank you most heartily and sin-

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cerely, for the very great service you rendered both myself and the directors of the bank last night."

"Bother the directors!" said Faith, attempting to hide the tell-tale light in her hazel eyes. "*They* needn't congratulate themselves. I never even thought of them."

Arthur flushed and looked deeper into the eyes of the girl at his side.

"Then I am to infer," he said quietly, "that your thoughts were confined to one individual?"

This was very embarrassing. The hands that lay in her lap trembled a little.

"Yes," she said, affecting to misunderstand. "I thought a good deal about—the burglar."

Arthur smiled.

"Ah!" he said. "That estimable gentleman has made a clean breast of it. He says he'll never let sentiment interfere with his business plans again. But, seriously, Miss Allardyce, how did you free yourself from the imprisonment to which he condemned you? I thought——" And he glanced curiously at her beautiful hair, now coiled in its former fashion above her head.

Faith coloured.

"Ah," she said, "that is the advantage of art! With a little dexterous manipulation I have made it look very much as it used to do. But in reality, it is more than half gone."

"Gone?" said Arthur.

"Yes," replied Faith, lowering her eyes, "I—I burnt it."

She took a packet from her writing-case, which lay at her side, and, unfolding it, disclosed a knotted mass of soft chestnut hair, with the ends all singed and burnt by the relentless taper. Arthur's hand trembled visibly as he touched it reverently. Then he took the girl's two hands in his and looked deep into her eyes.

"Faith," he whispered, "I have loved you from the very first day I saw you, two years ago. And, during the past few days, that love has increased until I can keep silent no longer. Faith, my own darling, will you share the home of a poor man? You may have more brilliant opportunities, dear, but you will not find a more loving and devoted husband than I. Will you—will you be my wife?"

"Yes," she whispered, resting her head upon his shoulder; "and—and—the love is not all—one-sided, Arthur."

With a cry of joy he caught her to his breast and kissed her passionately. A step sounded outside the door, and they released each other. There was a glad light in Arthur's eyes, and a self-conscious confusion about Faith's manner as Minnie entered, that was as legible to that understanding young lady as the type in an American headline. She sat down on a chair and laughed softly and triumphantly.

"That burglar wasn't such a bad lot after all," she said mysteriously. "Oh, dear, and I shall have to play goose-berry now!"

There was no misunderstanding the latter remark, and Faith, with flaming cheeks, went swiftly over to Minnie's side, and, kneeling down, hid her face in her friend's dress. Minnie put her soft hand on the artistically arranged hair and smoothed it lovingly.

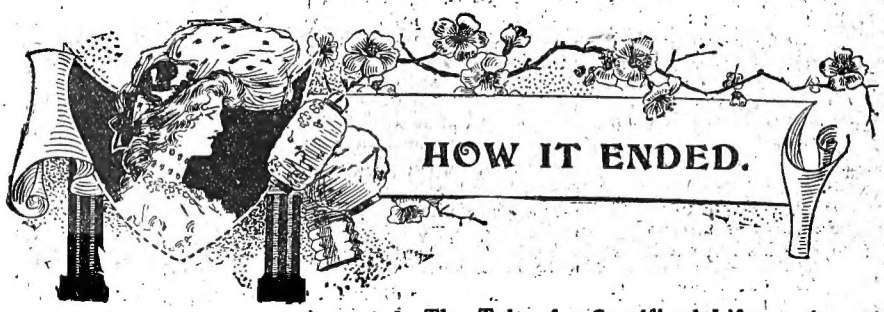
"What about the appointment and the fifteen hundred a year?" she whispered, banteringly. "It isn't quite a certainty, you know."

Faith lifted her face and looked across at her lover.

"Never mind!" she said confidently. "I am sure he will get it!"

And he did.

W. J. Mowbray.



HOW IT ENDED.

The Tale of a Sacrificed Life.

"You cur! If ever you insult this lady in this manner again, I'll thrash your miserable life out of you."

The speaker's blue eyes were blazing with fury, and his grasp on the other's throat went near to choking out what little breath there was left in him.

"Oh, don't hurt him," said a girl's soft voice, as she put a restraining hand on to Norman Silverwood's arm. "He doesn't really know what he is doing."

"Then he ought to be taught," said the man furiously; but a second glance at the other's white, vacant face, with its tangled mass of reddish hair, seemed to tell him something of the truth, and he realised that it was scarcely a fair fight, for God's brightest gift of intelligence had been denied to the pitiful object he had almost shaken the life out of. Flinging him on to the soft grass, Norman said a little more gently:

"Remember what I say; if this occurs again you shall not escape so lightly as you have done to-day. Now go!"

Casting a malignant glance, full of hatred, at Norman, and muttering something about "paying him out for this," the poor half-witted creature rose to his feet and was soon lost sight of down the winding path which led to the village. As he disappeared through the trees Norman, drawing a small flask of brandy out of his pocket, said:

"What a lucky thing I had some left. Do take it, you look quite white and shaken."

Drawing her towards the stump of an old tree, he made her sit down, and in a few minutes—after one or two sips from Norman's flask—the pretty colour began to return to the girl's face, and looking up at him, she said:

"Thank you so much for your help. I am so glad you happened to be passing just at that moment. Although I don't think Stephen would have hurt me, I didn't want him to kiss me."

"I should think not, indeed," said Norman, throwing himself on to the grass by the girl's side. "Does he belong to the village?"

"Yes, he and his mother settled here about four years ago, soon after my father was made Vicar."

"Ah, that explains it," said Norman. "Then you are Miss Fairfax? I remember hearing of poor old Grantley's death soon after I went away, and my aunt has often spoken of you to me since I returned." Then, seeing the girl's look of bewilderment, he rose, and laughingly taking off his hat, bowed low to the ground as he said, "Norman Silverwood, at your service, madam."

"Why I know you quite well," said the girl naively; "at least"—correcting herself—"I mean Miss Silverwood has told me all about you. You're not a bit like what I thought you would be," she went on, "and I'm so glad."

"Why, what in the world did you expect to find?" asked the man, amused by the girl's frank outspokenness.

"Well, Miss Silverwood said you were so awfully handsome, and clever, and good, that I felt quite afraid of meeting you, and after all you are——"

But here the girl stopped, for Norman was laughing un-

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restrainedly at the absolute relief plainly written on her expressive face.

"'Wad some fay the giftie gie us, to see ourselves as ithers see us,'" quoth he. "I am glad Kismet put it into my way to remove such an awful impression from your mind. Handsome—clever—good; what a fearful thing to have to live up to all that, Miss Fairfax. I couldn't possibly do it."

"Well, you know," looking at him critically, "you are rather good looking after all." But another roar of laughter stopped Miss Fairfax's flow of eloquence, and she rose, saying with a blush, "I'm afraid I'm getting tied into a knot, Mr. Silverwood, I'd better go home."

"May I see you to the Vicarage?" he asked, picking up his fishing tackle, which had laid all this time where he flung it as he sprang to the girl's assistance. "What did you call him? Stephen may be loafing about somewhere in the glen, and you wouldn't like another encounter to-day, I'm sure."

"No," said the girl, as she thanked him for his escort. "A little of 'Mr. Stephen' goes a long way."

"Yes, he's not altogether an acquisition to the village, Miss Fairfax. Poor beggar! I'm sorry I handled him so roughly. After all, as you say, he would not know what he was doing."

When they arrived at the Vicarage gate they chanced upon Freda's father, a cheery, white-haired, benevolent-looking old gentleman, who, when he heard of the service Norman had done his daughter, who was the very apple of his eye, could not make enough of the young fellow.

"Come in, my boy, and dine with us," he said heartily; "that is, if you have nothing better to do, and Freda shall sing to us." As Norman looked down at his rough tweed suit, in a half-hearted sort of apology, the old man went on genially, "Oh, never mind your clothes, we are not smart people. Far from it, eh, Freda?"

She reached the pistol just in time to save the shot.

"No, father; and I think I can arrange for a wash and a brush-down for Mr. Silverwood, if that will ease his conscience at all." Norman agreed with ready alacrity, for he was in no great haste to part from his newly-made friends. Freda came down from her room looking very fresh and dainty in her clinging white gown, with her shining hair piled loosely on the top of her small head. Such pretty hair it was—Norman thought he had never seen any quite so pretty before—and then her eyes! They had a curious way of dilating when she was pleased or excited, which made Norman think how he could best rouse her interest and gain a look from those lustrous depths. As dinner proceeded, the talk turned to Freda's recent adventure, and Mr. Fairfax quite agreed with Norman when he suggested that it might be as well if the man were put under restraint.

"Oh, no, father," said Freda. "Stephen is really perfectly harmless, and it would almost break his mother's heart if she had to part with him. She has nobody else, you know."

"Yes, I am aware of that, Freda," said the old man, "but he is gradually getting worse, I am sure, and it will end in that eventually."

The conversation soon strayed to pleasanter topics, however, and Stephen was soon forgotten by the three he had helped so strangely to bring together. After dinner Freda kept her promise of singing to them, and as Norman listened to the clear, sympathetic voice, the charm of the girl's personality crept over him very strongly. When the old gentleman dropped into a light doze in his easy chair the two wandered out into the pleasant, old-fashioned garden, with its wealth of flowers, for it was just the time of the roses, and they were blooming, here, there, and everywhere, in luxurious profusion. To the two lingering there—although they scarcely realised it yet—it was the beginning of the "old, old story" which to young hearts is ever new, and when the "Good-nights" were said, and Mr. Fairfax gave Norman a hearty invitation for "any time," it was Freda's eyes which his own sought as he said:

"If I shall not be in your way? If I shall be welcome?"

"Yes, come in any time, Mr. Silverwood," she said, with a shy glance up at him. "We shall always be so pleased to see you."

And so the summer crept on apace, and soon it became a regular thing for Miss Fairfax and the "young Master," as the villagers called Norman, to be seen about together, and the old women, gossiping over their cups of tea, drew their own conclusions, which, to tell the truth, were not very wide of the mark.

"They be a fine couple, and she'll make a bonny mistress up at the old place." So ran the story, and great was the interest taken in the doings of the two.

One day just before Christmas, as Freda and Norman were sitting in the cosy drawing-room at the Vicarage, Norman, in an absent-minded manner, whistled a few bars of one of the dreamy waltzes Freda would at times play for him.

"How I should love a waltz," said the girl, a little wistfully.

"Yes, I shouldn't mind one myself," said Norman, "a downright good dance would be fine, wouldn't it?"

"Rather! I should say so," said the girl, "although I have never been to a proper dance—a ball, I mean—in my life."

"Never been to a ball!" repeated Norman. "Good gracious! How's that?"

"Well, they don't grow on trees about here," said the girl quaintly. Norman said nothing, but about ten days later Freda found an envelope with the Silverwood crest on her plate when she came down to breakfast, and opening it, gave a little shriek of delight when she saw the inclosure.

"Oh, father—listen," she cried; then reading from the thick, gilt-edged card, "Mr. Norman Silverwood presents his

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compliments to Miss Freda Fairfax, and requests the pleasure of her company at Silverwood Hall, Tuesday, Jan. 25th," then in one corner, "Dancing nine o'clock." "Oh, father, isn't it perfectly lovely?"

"Yes, my darling, I am very glad," he said, beaming at her over his gold-rimmed spectacles. Anything which gave pleasure to Freda was sure to please the old man. When the great day arrived, and Freda went down into the study to show herself in all her bravery to her father just before starting for the Hall, a very soft look came into the old man's eyes as he kissed her and bade her go and enjoy herself.

"You are your mother over again to-night," he said, and indeed Freda's resemblance to the lovely woman whose photograph always looked down from the old man's study walls was very great. "Good night, my pet," he went on, "be back in good time to-morrow."

Miss Silverwood had thoughtfully sent the girl word she should expect her to stay overnight, for Norman had made no secret of the fact that it was Freda, and Freda's enjoyment alone, which guided all his thoughts, as he and the old lady planned out this dance, to which half the countryside had been invited. She was prepared, therefore, to help Norman with all her heart, for Freda was a great favourite of the old lady.

What a fairyland it all seemed to Freda! Norman was amply repaid for all his thoughts and trouble by the sight of the girl's happy face. Her first ball—and with Norman close at hand to anticipate her every wish. What more could the heart of girlhood want?

"Are you enjoying it, Miss Fairfax?" he said as he led her towards the conservatory after one of their many dances together.

"Ah—more than I can say!" she answered, with eyes shining like twin stars. "And I owe it all to you!"

Looking down at her in all her loveliness, Norman felt more than ever how altogether desirable she was, and, instead of going into the conservatory, turned into the library—a cosy little room at the side of the house—unlighted for the time being by anything but the firelight, which was casting quaint shadows on to the walls.

"Freda, come in here," he said in a low, unsteady voice, "I want to speak to you." Closing the door behind him, he stood gazing at the girl, all his heart in his eyes, dumb, where he would fain said so much.

"What do you want?" she asked, half frightened by the intentness of his gaze.

"You," he answered, holding out his arms towards her. "Oh, Freda—darling—can't you see how much I want you—how much I love you——"

No need to ask if she loved him. As the soft white arms found their way round his neck, a whisper, light as a summer breeze, caught his ear.

"Norman—I love you with all my heart and soul."

As his arms closed round the slender figure, Norman felt that earth could hold no fairer thing for him than this one woman's love, given to him, as he felt, fresh and pure as a child's.

"When will you come to me, Freda?" he whispered. "There is nothing to keep my little wife away. We will be married in the Spring?" raising the sweet, shy face that he might read his answer there.

Just then they were both startled by a slight sound in the direction of the window, which opened straight on to the lawn, and as they turned, caught a glimpse, for a moment, of a white, vacant face, with its tangled reddish hair hanging almost to the eyes.

"It's Stephen," said Freda, grasping Norman's arm nervously, for the look on the man's face was not good to see and she felt that it boded evil for them.

"Yes," said Norman, as he rushed to the window, and out on to the lawn, but not a trace could he find of the poor, half-witted creature, who had evidently been attracted to the house by the lights. "Poor chap," said Norman, as he gave up the search and closed the window again. "He has never forgiven me for the shaking I gave him the day I met you in the glen. Freda, I think sometimes he would like to return the compliment, he glares at me so ferociously whenever I meet him."

"Oh, Norman, you don't think he will ever do you any harm, do you!" said Freda nervously, for the evil look on the man's face had upset her, and for the first time she found herself wishing that he was under restraint.

"Harm?" laughed Norman. "What harm could he do me, little one?" drawing up his six feet two inches of manly strength with conscious power written all over it. "But come, darling, little as I want to go, we must not desert Aunt Maggie too long, she will wonder whatever has become of us."

But Aunt Maggie had a shrewd idea as to the state of affairs, as she saw the two faces when they entered the ball-room together a few minutes later, and was quite prepared for Norman's announcement, after the guests had left, that Freda had promised to marry him in the Spring "if it was all right to father."

The old lady took the girl to her room herself, and left a very happy, if wakeful Freda, tucked comfortably amongst the white pillows. Ah! Life was so sweet, and love was so beautiful. The daylight had made its way broadly into the room, before Freda fell asleep, to dream it all over again.

* * * * *

It was the day before the wedding-day, and Norman had just left the Vicarage—purposely early—for there were many things to see to, and one or two letters to write, as he told Freda.

"Rest well, my darling," he said tenderly. "My little sweetheart must look her best to-morrow," and he had left her, with many a good-night kiss, more than usually unwilling to go. For half an hour, the girl sat lost in a happy dream, and then she caught sight of Norman's pocket-book, which he had evidently forgotten to replace, after looking at the letters he had said wanted answering.

"How annoyed he will be," she thought, and then, "I will slip across to the Hall with it myself, it is not late, and the maids are so busy with their preparations for to-morrow." Leaving word with Hannah—the old housekeeper—that she would be back in half an hour, she slipped on her cloak, pulling the hood over her bright hair as she went down the garden path. She met nobody as she quickly made her way to the Hall, and then, seeing lights coming from the library window, was just crossing the lawn to look in and see if Norman were there, when she was startled to see the figure of a man who was peering through the window, totally oblivious of her presence. Something in the uncouth figure struck her as strangely familiar, and as she crept softly towards him over the grass, she saw with a sickening feeling at her heart that it was Stephen.

"What could he want there again?" Looking into the brilliantly-lighted room she could distinctly see Norman, bending over his desk with his back to the window, engrossed in his writing. Paralysed with fear, the girl kept her eyes fixed on that hateful figure, fearing to move or to call out. Just then Stephen raised his right hand, and she saw with a horror which seemed to freeze the very blood in her veins that he was grasping a pistol. As he half turned with it in the moonlight his face was terrible to look upon. Always repulsive, his eyes had a wild, determined look in them now, which almost told the girl what his intention was. Creeping with heavily-beating heart and a wild prayer for help on her lips, she just reached him, as he raised his hand again, and pointed the deadly weapon towards the window.

With a heart-rending cry of "Norman! Norman!" she grasped the pistol, turning it, in her agony, as she did so, full upon herself, and when Norman rushed, half-maddened, to the window, it was to find Freda laid with the hood fallen from her sunny hair, the blood from that cruel wound staining her white gown, while Stephen stood looking on with the horrible laughter of madness on his face.

"There—will—be—no—to-morrow—for—us—Norman," gasped the girl. "Thank—God—I—was—in—time—to—save—you——"

But did he?

Biddy Lamb.

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A HIDEOUS MISTAKE.

A Tale of Love and Avarice.

THE day was done. André and Marie Anquetin were eating their simple evening meal. The little kitchen in which they sat was such a room as one may see in almost any of the farming districts of Normandy; small and neat.

The furniture was plain, but the white muslin curtains at the windows and a shelf filled with geraniums in bloom gave it an air of comfort. André and his wife were old. The deep wrinkles and hard lines of their faces, their bent figures and halting gait, told a tale of trouble and hard work.

"I do wish Jean would come home," said the woman, as she rose from the table and began clearing away the dishes. "It's fifteen years since he went away, and it does seem as if he might come back to see his old mother. If he had only been content like Lus Mignot and stayed at home, how happy we should have been."

"I told you," replied the old man, "that you should let well alone. The lad was a fine boy, and would have done as well here as in England. I firmly believe if you can't get your porridge among your own folks, strangers won't give it to you. It was your high notions that did it, and now we must bear it as best we can."

Marie was silenced, and without saying any more André went out and sat on the low wooden seat beside the door, while his wife washed the dishes and tidied up the room. When she had made the house neat she went and stood beside her husband. The sun was setting, making the rows of bright-coloured flowers in the little garden glow in the rich light. The apple trees were white with their snowy promises of harvest. In the distance the poppy-besprinkled grain waved in the gentle breeze.

"Ah, Marie," he said, taking her hard and wrinkled hand in his, "Normandy is beautiful in May."

She did not heed his remark. Drawing her hand away, she said, "I am going to mind Dame Robbe, and may not come home until late. The old woman is in a very bad state, and isn't long for this world. Don't sit up for me."

Taking his pipe from his mouth, the old man slowly rose and faced his wife.

"I don't like this," he said. "Before the lad went away you were always a-working and a-saving to set him up when he got big. He went and left us. You made him. He has been away for fifteen years, and ever since he left us you have been a-working and a-saving for him when he comes back. What good are we getting out of life? Not any. I think it is time to stop!"

"Why, André, you wouldn't have the old woman suffer for want of care, would you?"

"No," he continued; "but it is not Dame Robbe that you care for, it's her money that you want to save for the boy."

Without replying, Marie Anquetin moved up the street as fast as her bent form and halting steps would let her, and was soon lost to view in the gathering gloom.

Her husband watched her retreating figure, not without feelings of sorrow. When she could no longer be seen, he relit his pipe, which had gone out during the discussion, and resumed his place on the settle.

More than thirty years before he and Marie had married and moved into the little cottage. She was a beauty then. On market days, when they stood in the great square of Rouen selling their vegetables and flowers, many a passer-by would stop to look at the pretty flower vendor and her handsome husband. Those were happy days. When their child was born they called him Jean. His winning ways gained for him the goodwill of all the village people. André and Marie were justly proud of him. "I don't want him like we are," his mother would often say, as she and her husband talked about his prospects and planned for the future. "He must be like the fine folks that used to come to the château when you were under-butler and I was ladies' maid, André."

"Perhaps so, but it takes money, and piles of it, to be like them," the father would reply.

"I know that, dearie, but we can earn and save, and when he grows up he will have enough to start on. It will be a fine thing to have our Jean a great man."

Marie Anquetin was one of those people who could love intensely; yet such was her nature that many passions, many hopes, could not find a place in her heart at one time. Gradually the motherly instinct gained the ascendency, and while she yet loved her husband, she did not feel towards him as she had before the child was born. Her ruling passion was love for her boy. For him she lived, toiled, and hoarded the fruits of her labours. Year after year she gave her life to him.

One morning, coming from confession in St. Ouen's, before she took her place beside the little cart in the great square, she heard a man say to his companion that England was the best place on earth for a young man to become rich and prosperous. Her ideas of England were vague, but she at once resolved that Jean should go to that place, wherever it was. A dozen times she repeated the word to herself, that she might not forget it. An hour later, when the man stopped before the little cart, she made bold to ask him about this England of which he had spoken. On their way home she talked incessantly about that strange country and Jean, until André, wearied with her prattle, got down and walked far in advance of the cart.

From that day she never wavered in her determination that Jean should go to the land of riches. Sometimes she did

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think to herself, "Jean might stay here to help about the place," yet her motherly ambition kept her to her resolve.

When the boy was sixteen she had saved enough to pay his passage and start him in life, and, in spite of André's protests, Jean was sent across the sea to make his fortune.

"It almost breaks my heart to let him go," she said, when the neighbours came to bid him good-bye, "but a mother must not stand in the way of her child. He can love me as well away from me as here under my nose."

She saw him go down the road and across the fields, then she went into the house and shut herself away, in her boy's room, from her neighbours and husband.

The little cottage seemed very lonely after Jean had gone. In all those years of living and caring for the boy the wife had grown blind to the needs of the husband. Now that her idol had left her, he who remained behind neither cared for nor would receive the little kindnesses and tokens of affection that were resumed after many years of neglect. Not that they lived unhappily together—hundreds of families have the same existence—but the poetry of their early married life had become prose.

They both kept to their work—André that he might support himself and wife, and Marie that she might save for Jean. Every penny that she got was carefully hidden away along with the letters that came from over the sea from her boy.

When she had nothing else to do, which was seldom, or when a moment could be stolen from work, she would take from its hiding place the shining hoard, thinking, as she touched each piece, of her Jean and the good it would do him. When she could she would take from her husband's money a few centimes to add to her own store.

The years passed, the pile grew slowly but steadily, while old age crept on with relentless pace. She was no longer young and her beauty had gone. When she stood in the market place of Rouen no one noticed.

"Joan must go with us to market to-day," she said to her husband one morning. Her voice trembled, and a great tear rolled down her deep-wrinkled face. Joan was her niece. "I have ceased to be attractive. Joan is beautiful, and must take my place. If she succeeds, I will stay at home to work in the fields, and care for the sick. I shall be just as useful, and Jean's pile will grow."

Joan took her aunt's place, and Marie never went to market again. Mornings when Marie saw Joan leave for Rouen the tears would come to her eyes as she thought of the days when she was young and beautiful.

Even the dullest of us have times of reflection when the past comes back with startling clearness. As old André Anquetin sat there in the twilight the years seemed to roll by in a long, dismal procession. The light of his pipe went out, his head rested against the casement of the door; he had fallen asleep. A slight noise made by opening and shutting the gate aroused the sleeper. Before him stood a man. He was well dressed, wore a full beard, and carried in his hand a small bundle.

"My good man," he said, "can you direct me to the inn in this village?"

"There is no inn here. Strangers don't come this way. You will find an inn at the next place across the fields or at Rouen."

"I have travelled a long way, and am tired. Can't you give me lodging?" said the intruder.

André hesitated a moment. "No, I don't think I can," he said. "You see, Dame Anquetin is away, and might not like it. I don't think I can."

"Did you say your name was Anquetin?" said the stranger.

"Yes," replied the old man, "I am André Anquetin. My wife's name is Marie."

"I know a Jean Anquetin in England," continued the young man.

"You know Jean, you? Why, Heaven bless you, come in, and if Marie don't like it—well, well, she won't mind if you tell her of her Jean."

The old man seized the stranger and led him into the kitchen. "Well, well, you know our Jean! Sit down while I make a light. It's a blessing you came this way."

He bustled about to light a candle, and quickly set before the stranger the best he could find in the little cupboard, then he seated himself near his guest.

"Now tell me all about my son," he said. "Is he well? Is he rich? Will he soon come home? Tell me all."

"Yes," answered the stranger, "he is well, and in the years since he left home he has grown from a big boy into a strong, thoughtful man."

"Just like me," interrupted the old man, "just like me; but go on."

"He speaks of you often, and never ceases to think of you and his mother. He loves you both."

"Of course, and we both love him," said André, "while his mother works night and day to save money for him."

The young man laughed, yet had the candle given more light, old André might have seen the look of pain that came to the face of the young man.

"Works to save money for him! Why, he is rich, richer than anyone in this village, so he tells me," said the guest.

"But why doesn't he come home and let us share his fortune?" asked André. "We have worked and saved for him. He is a thoughtless, wicked lad not to help us in our old age. I told Marie she was silly and now I know it."

"Do not say that, he is working for you. Soon he hopes to come home and make you rich and happy all your life."

"If he don't come soon it will be too late; we sha'n't want his help."

In his excitement the old man moved the candle, which at best gave but a dim light, near his guest. As he did so, his eyes caught the flash of the ring upon the stranger's finger. It was one of those silver bands such as the peasants of Normandy wear, of no value, yet peculiar to themselves. He gazed at it for some time, then, reaching across the table, took the stranger's hand in his, and examined the bauble more closely.

"My son used to wear a ring like that," he said. "His mother gave it to him when he left home."

"And my mother gave me this," replied the stranger.

The old man looked up, the smiling eyes of the guest told their story, and in an instant they held each other in a close embrace.

"Heaven be praised for this. Come near the light, my boy, my eyes are dim; let me look at you. Your mother will be wild with delight. I will go to tell her at once."

"No, father," said the son; "let her continue her good work. Do not let her know until morning. She will be tired when she comes home, and seeing me may be too much for her. Let her know in the morning, and to-morrow we will have a holiday. Neither you nor she shall ever work again. But come, father, let us go into the garden; it is warm here."

The two men left the room, and, arm-in-arm, wandered through the garden and out into the fields. The moonlight shone upon them as they talked. The clock in the village struck ten.

"We must go in now," said the son; "we are both tired."

"Your room is ready for you," said old André. "Ever

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since you went away your mother has had it in readiness for you when you came back. Good night. Heaven bless you, as it has us all. Good night."

Taking the candle, the young man climbed the short flight of stairs and entered the little room. It was just as he had left it years before. There were his kite, his top, and all the playthings that he used to love so well, while on the table was a bunch of fresh flowers. The perfume came to him like a breath from Heaven.

As Jean was very tired, he was soon asleep, dreaming of childhood scenes. With the father it was different. His son's coming home gave him so much happiness that he could not sleep; besides, he must tell Marie, when she came back, that a stranger was upstairs. He laughed softly as he thought how curious she would be, and how surprised in the morning when she should find out that it was Jean.

Sometime after midnight the wife returned. Old Dame Robbe was dead. Marie had seen the work of the Great Destroyer so many times that his awful presence did not disturb her. She was droning a song of the people. She had hardly entered the house, when André arose to tell her the news.

"What, you up?" she said. "Get to bed."

"Hist, don't make so much noise. There is a visitor upstairs in the boy's room," said André.

The old woman stood glaring at her husband, surprised into a silence which gave him a chance to offer an apology for his offence. "He came here," he continued, "and begged me to take him in. He was tired out with walking, and so I let him sleep in the boy's room."

The old woman turned livid with rage.

"Beast!" she hissed, "a stranger in my boy's room! I won't have it. I will go and pull him out," and she moved towards the door which led to the stairs.

André caught her and held her fast. "Marie," he said, "have a care. The man has money, heaps of it. He will pay us well, more for his night's lodging than we can earn in weeks."

At mention of the money the woman became calmer, but she did not cease talking about it until after they were in bed.

"We must charge him a good price," she said. "It's no small thing to have a stranger in one's house. He ought to bless Heaven that he has a place to lay his head, instead of having to tramp across the fields. If he is rich, he can pay well, and our boy's pile grows so slowly."

"Come, come, Marie, enough of this. I want to sleep, so say no more about it. I will settle with him in the morning."

"You—you settle with him! No, not you. Why, you would let him go without paying a sou, and our boy's pile be no larger."

André Anquetin was soon asleep; not so his wife. The thought of the gold set her brain on fire; she could not sleep. A dozen times she asked herself how much she should charge the stranger for his night's lodging. Surely a shining gold piece would not be too much. He had been saved a long walk; perhaps he would give her two.

If she told him how she was saving that her boy might come home, no doubt he would be generous. A fever seized her. She clutched her hands together as if she already had the coins in her possession. Supposing he refused to pay her more than a few silver pieces. No, no, he would not do that, and yet he might.

Why should she not take just a few bits while he slept? She would be sure of them then, and very likely he would never miss them. Jean needed them more than this man. But if she should be found out, the gendarme would arrest her, and she would be sent to prison. The thought overpowered her, and she lay quite still. How loud and terrible seemed to her the heavy, regular breathing of her husband. She could endure it no longer. The darkness and the stillness affected her, and her great desire to possess the money took complete possession of her.

Rising from the bed, she put on an old short skirt and a heavy blouse. Her heart beat fast, and its throbs sounded so loud to her that she felt as if it must awaken her husband. She looked at him, but he was fast asleep. With stealthy tread she climbed the stairs. At the open door she stopped to listen. The breathing of the sleeper came to her distinct and clear, yet it was almost lost in the beating of her own heart. For a moment she hesitated, a thousand thoughts of other days surged through her brain as she stood there, but the one great desire that had brought her there urged her on.

The moonlight filled the room with a mellow glow. She could see the form of the stranger; the upper part of the face was hidden by his arm, thrown over the forehead, his clothes folded and laid over a chair, and on the table beside the flowers she had put there in the morning was a pile of shining gold.

She could see nothing else. The gold pieces fairly glowed before her excited vision. They seemed to burn great holes in her brain, and fill her whole soul with a wild delirium.

She thought only of that beautiful yellow pile and of her boy Jean. She felt like screaming with delight, but her parched lips gave no sound. Silently and carefully she tiptoed her way into the room like a cat approaching a mouse, and stood before the table and the golden treasure. The man slept. She took a few of the gold pieces and put them in her pocket, then she reached for more.

A slight noise stopped her. The man moved in his sleep. In her excited fancy she thought he was awake and had discovered her taking the gold. Her agitation knew no bounds, the blood coursed through her veins with quickened speed; the strength of fury and despair came to her.

She turned, and with a spring seized the sleeper by the throat, while her knees struck him upon the chest. The shock awoke him, and he tried to free himself, but the bedclothes hampered him. He could not speak, for she held him with a grasp of iron. The frenzy was on her, and to all his efforts she opposed an irresistible pressure. For an instant he looked into the face that bent over him, and, like one in an evil dream, knew it for the face of his mother, but, still like one in a dream, struggled vainly to speak.

Little by little his convulsive writhings lessened. In a few moments he ceased to struggle and was still. He was dead.

Relaxing her grip, for her strength was gone, she got down from the bed, catching her foot in the coverings as she did so. For a moment she thought that the man had seized her, and she turned pale with fear. Giving a fierce pull at her clothes, she loosened the coverings of the bed, and the hand of the man was exposed. The ring upon the finger glistened in the moonlight and attracted her attention. Raising the hand fearfully in hers, she turned the ring upon the finger. A sickening fear overcame her, for the little silver band had a strange, familiar look.

"No, no," she muttered to herself. Her heart almost stopped beating. With a terrible despair she seized the head of the man and dragged it into the strong moonlight.

Then she understood.

In the morning while dressing himself, André Anquetin softly hummed a tune such as long years ago he used to sing when he wished to send little Jean into the land of dreams. "Marie has awakened before me," he thought, "but I will have my little surprise. I will go to wake Jean." He smiled at the thought of the meeting. Slowly he climbed the stairs and stood at the door of Jean's room. He saw his son upon the bed, and, kneeling beside him, the mother, singing her gentle lullaby, the lullaby of a mother and a woman bereft of reason. It was only for an instant; the next moment the disease, that of the heart, which for so many years he had feared, mercifully smote him. He was again with his son.

Years have passed since then, yet the peasants, when they go by the deserted house and the barren fields, still cross themselves and utter a prayer.

Leonard Burbank.

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For the Sake of His Love.

How Eric Rayburn Bravely Sacrificed His Prospects.

ERIC RAYBURN, private secretary to Sir Arthur Mostyn, K.C.B., M.P., and Cabinet Minister, stood with a disconsolate expression on his face in the study at Mostyn House.

He was of an average type, but there was something striking in his frank, clear-cut features and honest, blue eyes. A firm chin added strength to an already strong face.

"Slowcoach!" he muttered. "Well, I suppose I am; but I wish I had not heard her say so."

The previous evening he had strolled out into the grounds to enjoy a pipe, and, whilst he stood leaning against a tree and watching the last crimson streaks of fire fade from the western sky, he suddenly became conscious of voices.

The speakers, who were Sir Arthur Mostyn and Freda, his daughter, were on the other side of the thick hedge which separates the lawns from the orchard.

"I think I shall get in again," Sir Arthur was saying—he referred to the forthcoming elections. "Rayburn is a very good man for helping me."

"Yes, father," Freda had replied. "But don't you think he is rather a slowcoach?"

Then their voices had died away.

So he paced up and down the study floor, with his hands thrust deep in his pockets, and a thoughtful frown puckering up his face.

Eric Rayburn was quite alone in the world. His father, who had been Sir Arthur Mostyn's dearest friend, had died when Eric was about sixteen years old. He gave his boy into Sir Arthur's keeping, and received a promise from him that he would look after Eric for old times' sake; ill-fortune had left Mr. Rayburn with little to leave in the shape of money.

Eric had gone to Cambridge, and there had done exceedingly well. Sir Arthur's idea was to start him in a political career, and for that reason had taken him as his Parliamentary secretary.

Hardly had Eric made the acquaintance of Freda Mostyn ere he had fallen deeply in love with her.

But he was but a private secretary with his way to make in the world. She was the heiress to all the Mostyn estates, and the daughter of a Cabinet Minister. Again, he was a slowcoach—how that word rankled!

Perhaps he was a slowcoach in comparison with the Honourable Gordon Knevytt, who was first favourite with Freda Mostyn.

Gordon Knevytt was evidently created for the express purpose of winning women's hearts. He was as handsome a man as there was in the county, a first-rate shot and whip, and as much at home in the saddle as on foot. In addition he had a splendid voice and charming manners.

But this was all on the surface. For as long as it suited him, Gordon Knevytt could win and keep a woman's heart; but when her charms began to bore him, as they very often did, he tossed her aside without the slightest compunction; but still they loved him.

Beneath the surface there was a hard, selfish, callous nature which would kill the respect of any woman after a time.

However, his shortcomings were only known to the several women whose lives he had wrecked, and they were too proud to speak to the world of him.

But many men knew him for what he was. A man sees many things in another man which would not be apparent to a woman. So Eric Rayburn read Gordon Knevytt and knew him, and his heart was heavy with the knowledge that the woman he would give his life for was rapidly falling under the fascinations of this heartless schemer, who would feed on her sweetness until it tired him, and then—then he would seek fresh prey.

But what could Eric do? What right had he to say to Freda that Knevytt was only passing the time with her? He could bring no absolute proofs. Besides, whom would she believe—the man who fascinated her, or the man whom she designated as "Slowcoach"?

Gordon Knevytt had been staying at Mostyn House for over a month, and showed no signs whatever of curtailing his visit.

A merry laugh rang out; it was Freda's laugh. Eric walked to the window and looked out upon the terrace. There, in a little secluded alcove, were Knevytt and Freda. A pang of jealousy passed through his already torn heart. Why should he, who loved Freda with all the pure love of an honest man, have to stand by and watch this scoundrel throw his coils around her.

Now he stood and watched her sweet, expressive face

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lighting up with pleasure one moment, and then scarlet with blushes as Knevytt utilised his fascinating wiles.

What was that! Heavens above! Knevytt was kissing her, and she lay in his arms without resistance.

Then it was all over. He choked back the great sob that seemed to fill his throat, and blindly strove to continue his work.

But it was impossible, the vision of Freda in Knevytt's arms rose between him and his manuscript.

He felt he would go mad if he stayed where he was; so, hastily clearing up his papers, he sought relief in a ten mile tramp.

Some time passed by until one day Freda appeared to Eric to be worried. She hardly laughed, and when she spoke it appeared that she forced herself to it.

Eric intently watched Knevytt, but he seemed in no way different. Light-hearted and good-humoured, he appeared to be as ever. But, once or twice, Eric fancied he saw a slightly worried expression cross his face.

The engagement had not occasioned much surprise, but, from one or two remarks his chief had dropped, Eric was of the opinion that Sir Arthur was not greatly pleased. This gave him a certain amount of comfort, for he had determined to show Knevytt up; better a little sharp pang for Freda now, than a life-long misery.

He sat up late that night endeavouring to concoct a plan of action whereby he might save Freda from Knevytt.

What was that!

He jumped to his feet and went towards the door. Surely he heard footsteps. Cautiously he opened the door, but all was still as death. He stood for a few seconds listening. Surely he could hear something now.

There it was again, very muffled and slight, certainly, but it was the sound of some person moving about downstairs.

He crept out into the corridor, and stole to the head of the stairs. Then he looked over, down into the entrance-hall.

There was a light in the dining-room.

In that particular room was Sir Arthur Mostyn's safe, cleverly disguised with a wooden front as a bookcase. It was an idea of his own to outwit burglars, and in the study was another safe with nothing of any importance in it.

Cautiously he proceeded down the stairs, taking every precaution. He crept across the hall, and peeped into the room. What he saw caused his heart to almost stop beating, and it was only by a superhuman effort that he prevented himself from crying out.

Freda Mostyn was standing before the open safe, and in her hands was a bundle of bank-notes!

Freda a thief! What could it mean? Then he hesitated no longer, but went boldly into the room.

The girl swung round as she heard him, and gazed at him with terror-stricken eyes. Her face assumed the hue of death, and she swayed to and fro as though she would fall.

Then she recovered and tried to speak. But all she could do was to give utterance to a dry choking gasp.

At last speech came to her, and in trembling accents she whispered to her silent accuser.

"Don't tell father! For God's sake, don't tell father!"

"What does all this mean?" inquired Eric in a low tone, whilst he longed to take the trembling girl in his arms and comfort her.

She did not reply. A battle was going on within her; one voice urged her to confide in him, but an equally strong one told her to keep her secret. So she stood before him in an agony of dread, not knowing what to do.

"Don't be afraid, Miss Mostyn; I will do all I can to help you."

His kind, though gravely spoken, words did much to strengthen her; so that she decided to tell him all.

"You'll keep my secret?" she whispered.

"Yes, it will be safe with me."

"Gordon——"

"Ah!" he muttered, "as I thought!"

"Gordon," she went on with a mute appeal in her eyes, "has got deeply into debt, and he asked me if I could help him."

"Cad!" whispered Eric, but to Freda it sounded only like a swift intake of breath.

"He said he must have £200 by to-morrow, otherwise he would be arrested, and this was the only means I could think of getting it. I managed to obtain father's keys during the evening.

"What does this mean?" cried Sir Arthur. "What are you doing with those bank-notes?"

"Oh, don't be too hard!" she half sobbed. "I was going to put it back by selling some of my diamonds."

"Did Mr. Knevytt know how you were going to obtain the money?"

"No."

"Did he not ask what means you would use?"

"No; he only left it for me to do."

"The blackguard!" was Eric's unspoken thought, whilst aloud he said:

"If you will allow me, I will advance you the money." It just about represented his whole savings, but he was quite willing to do anything he could to help this poor helpless girl.

He took the banknotes from her trembling fingers as he spoke. She made a feeble show of resistance, whilst she watched him still with those soft, frightened eyes.

"You shall have my cheque in the morning, Miss Mostyn."

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"Oh, Mr. Rayburn, how——"

"*Hush!*" he whispered quickly.

In wild affright she clutched his arm until he almost winced.

There was someone coming down the stairs!

"Get behind these curtains, quick!" Eric whispered, as he pushed her into the shelter, and then he turned back to the safe.

"Why, what does this mean?" exclaimed Sir Arthur Mostyn as he entered the room.

Eric made no reply, but simply stood facing his chief.

"One o'clock in the morning, and you down here with the safe door open. And, as I live, banknotes?"

"Tell me, Rayburn," he continued quickly, "what does it mean? Quick, man, I'm waiting for your explanation."

"I have no explanation," said Eric, in a hard, dry voice which he hardly recognised as his own.

"Good Heavens! You must have an explanation. You don't mean that you were——" Sir Arthur paused, unable to frame the word.

Eric was silent.

"Eric, lad, speak up!" cried Sir Arthur. "If you're in want of money you have only to tell me. Come, give me your explanation, and let us go to bed."

"I have no explanation," again said Eric.

"I cannot believe that you were going to take the money. Will you not tell me?" intreated Sir Arthur.

Eric simply shook his head.

Sir Arthur Mostyn thrust back the notes, and locked the safe door. Then he turned to Eric.

"I will see that you are placed on the St. Petersburg Embassy immediately," he said. "Were I not certain that you are not morally guilty of the crime you were going to commit, I would wash my hands of you entirely. To-morrow, however, you will see about getting your things together."

"You are very good, Sir Arthur."

"I am sorry this has occurred, Eric. But you must carve your own way, now. Paris would have been your destination but for this, and I would have remained at your back, lad, but I cannot now."

Eric simply bowed his head.

Then Sir Arthur motioned him to go upstairs, standing and watching him as he went. And there were tears in his eyes, for Eric had held a great place in his heart.

Half an hour later, when all was still, Freda, pale and trembling, stole to her room and threw herself on the bed in an agony of grief.

Presently she got up, and restlessly walked up and down the room. Then she faced herself in the mirror, and saw her dead-white countenance, and great staring eyes.

"Oh, you little coward!" she muttered. "You little coward, why did you not speak? You have ruined a good man this night."

For some moments she stood surveying herself, and then she broke out in her condemnations again.

"Ugh! How could you? How could you? You despicable little coward! But it was for Gordon, for his sake."

And not for one moment did she blame Gordon Knevytt. Herself she despised, but not him.

Then the room seemed to spin round her, and, with a sobbing cry, she staggered to her bed, and, falling on it, fainted.

In the morning at the breakfast-table she appeared with pale face, and great black rings under her eyes. She explained that she had passed a sleepless night.

Both Sir Arthur Mostyn and Eric also showed traces of not having slept, but Eric wore a determined look, whereas there was a sad expression on Sir Arthur's countenance.

"I shall be going to town to-day, you had better pack your trunk, for I shall arrange for your departure in two days' time. There is a vacant third secretaryship which you will be appointed to," said Sir Arthur later on.

"Won't you take me into your confidence, lad?" he continued, with a winning smile.

"I cannot, Sir Arthur," Eric replied.

His chief's face resumed its stern, set look, and he departed for London.

A servant took a note to Freda from Eric, it contained his cheque for £200, and read as follows—

"Dear Miss Mostyn,—*I inclose you the cheque as promised. Please do not trouble to see me, as I am leaving here to-day for London, and I go to St. Petersburg on Friday. Wishing you all happiness in the future.—Believe me, your devoted servant,*

"Arthur Rayburn."

Freda shed tears over this pathetic little note, whilst she murmured, "For Gordon's sake."

And that afternoon Arthur Rayburn left Mostyn House, having previously addressed a letter to Sir Arthur giving him his address.

"So you've got it, Freda?" said Gordon Knevytt. "Rayburn's cheque! What does this mean?"

Then she told him, in faltering accents, the history of the previous night.

"Well, he's a pretty fair specimen of a fool!" was all the thanks that Knevytt offered for the two hundred pounds.

The callousness of it caused Freda to shudder, and she saw her lover for a moment in a very different light. She shrank from him as he strove to put his arms around her.

"Why," he said roughly, "what's the matter?"

"You are hardly grateful to Mr. Rayburn," she said in low tones.

"Grateful to that fool—why should I be?" he replied. "He hasn't done it out of any love for me, rather for you, I should say."

"For me?" she said. "What do you mean?"

"You are not going to tell me that you have not seen that this poor fool is madly in love with you?"

Freda gazed at him in astonishment, and then a great light dawned on her.

"For my sake?" she whispered.

"Oh, come, drop the melodrama! Let us talk about ourselves, when can we be married?"

Another time this question would have aroused very different feelings in Freda, but now the idea seemed almost repellent to her.

"I do not know," she murmured slowly. "I would rather not talk about it."

In London that night Eric Rayburn sat in a tawdry room in a Bloomsbury hotel, and his heart was well-nigh broken.

* * * * *

"There's a man to see Miss Freda," said a servant to Sir Arthur on the next day. "She has gone to Trowport, sir."

Trowport was the nearest town to Mostyn House.

"Show him up," said Sir Arthur. "I will see him."

The man was ushered in, he had come from the Bank.

"Can I do anything for you?" asked Sir Arthur.

"Well, sir, this cheque made out to Miss Mostyn has been presented, but it is wrongly indorsed, and we want her proper signature."

Sir Arthur took the cheque and looked at it.

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"Two hundred pounds, Eric Rayburn," he muttered wonderingly. "Whatever is this?"

He gazed at it for some moments, and then dismissed the man, saying that the cheque would be sent on.

"What does it mean?" he said again and again. "Is this—why——" he paused, unable to go on.

For some time he sat gazing at the cheque, whilst his amazement grew more and more profound.

When Freda came in she was told that Sir Arthur desired to see her, and, accordingly made her way to his study.

"How did you come by this?" was Sir Arthur's stern greeting.

She gazed at the cheque, then turned white as marble, but made no reply.

By dint of questioning, Sir Arthur got all the details from her in tearful accents.

"So," he said grimly, "Mr. Gordon Knevytt is at the bottom of this, is he?

"I am glad I made some inquiries about this gentleman; except that he was a son of Lord Ventnor we knew nothing of him. My invitation to him at the Conservative was purely a matter of form, I did not expect him to accept," continued Sir Arthur. "Do you love him, Freda?"

The directness of the question completely nonplussed her, and she could only reply brokenly.

"I—er—think so."

"Well, my dear girl," he went on, "as far as I can make out, Gordon Knevytt is a precious scoundrel, and the sooner you think differently the better. I will have more to say to you on the subject later."

The next development that arose was that Gordon Knevytt had been arrested by a firm of Jews, for Sir Arthur had intimated to the Trowport Bank that the cheque for two hundred pounds would not be cashed.

Meanwhile, Eric's departure had been postponed awaiting the result of Sir Arthur's investigations through the medium of a private detective agency. Eric had no conception of the real state of affairs.

The detective agency had only a sorry tale to tell. It was to the effect that Gordon Knevytt was deeply in debt everywhere, and was staving off his creditors with the prospects of his father's death, and also his marriage with Miss Mostyn. Further, Knevytt had married a woman in London in 1899, but she had disappeared, and was supposed to be in America.

This was the final blow, and now Freda realised that what she mistook for love was but an evil fascination. Now she saw clearly all the many bad traits which before she had glossed over.

The horror of it all completely unnerved her, and she took to her bed, wrecked in mind and body.

Brain fever followed, and for three weeks she hung between life and death. When she recovered consciousness her first question was of Eric.

She was told that he had not gone to Russia, but had been reinstated, and that things were as ever between him and Sir Arthur.

As she lay there through her slow recovery, she thought of him, day in, day out, until she was almost ashamed at the manner in which he occupied her thoughts.

"I wonder," she murmured aloud. "Did he really love me—poor Eric?" A vivid blush suffused her face as she heard herself repeat his name, and it deepened as a voice alongside her said:

"He did, my child." She glanced up in wonder, to see Sir Arthur standing by her bedside. He had come in quietly, and unnoticed.

"Oh, father, I am so miserable!" she cried, and then the tears came.

"Get well quickly, my dear," muttered Sir Arthur brokenly, "and come and comfort the boy, for he is more miserable than you."

When she was alone she gave herself up to her thoughts, and the wonderful new feeling that she experienced.

"I never knew it," she murmured. "Will he forgive me?"

Soon she was allowed to sit up in her room, and then she was strong enough to come downstairs.

She sat before a big fire in the drawing-room wrapped up in the depths of a great armchair. The door opened and Eric entered.

"Welcome downstairs, Miss Mostyn!" he exclaimed.

"And you," she replied, "you are very welcome, for I owe much to you which I can never repay."

Her fragile beauty filled him with a wondrous pity, and he knelt by her side and murmured:

"You can, Freda. Only give yourself to me, and you will far more than repay."

"I am not worthy," she whispered brokenly.

"Worthy?" he whispered back. "Why, dear, you are far more worthy of happiness than I. Freda, darling, I love you."

Her downcast eyes looked up for a moment into his, and in that brief space he read all that he desired. Tenderly he placed his arms round her and kissed her on the lips.

E. Newton Bungey.

Your Editor Chats.

Mr. H. Peacock, of 149, Sefton Street, Southport, carries off the guinea offered for what I considered the best solution of the second Unsolved Love Problem, "The Mistake of Millicent Howard." Judging by the number of replies received, I gather that these problems are a great success, and I am sure you will all be glad to hear that another one, making the fifth of the series, will appear next week. In the same number I shall announce the winner of the guinea offered in connection with the problem, "The Dilemma of Betty Carteret."

And now a few words as to our Christmas Number. I hope nobody will accuse me of blowing my own trumpet when I state that it is the finest Christmas number that I have ever helped to produce. This I may say without exaggeration, for I have, in company with my staff, spent many hours in its preparation, with the result that I have got together as excellent a production as I possibly could. All your favourite writers will contribute to it, as well as W. Pett Ridge, John K. Prothero, and others. There will be competitions with valuable prizes offered, and there will be the first instalment of a grand new serial.

This will be from the pen of Blanche Eardley, whom readers will remember as the author of "The Bond Between." The title of the serial will be "Dupes of Destiny," and it is a most striking romance. The authoress has exerted her best powers in this story, and it is destined to be one of the finest romances that *Short Stories* has ever had. I should recommend everyone to read "Dupes of Destiny," for exciting episodes follow each other in rapid succession, and the plot of the story is an exceptionally strong one.

A lady reader, who writes in praise of our Tartan covers, wishes to know if the name of Dickson is connected with any Scottish clan. I am afraid that I cannot answer her question off hand, but perhaps some of my readers North of the Tweed might be able to volunteer information.

Your Editor.

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THE PURSUIT OF SARA

The names of persons mentioned in this series are not necessarily the correct ones.

MY LAST JOURNEY.

I DID not waste time in argument, but deliberately ignoring Shackell, turned abruptly to the detective.

"I am glad you are here," I said, much to his surprise; "I believe you want to see me about an accident that occurred in the quarry up Tuttle Hill? If you will lead the way I will follow you; it is impossible to talk here."

He moved away with a puzzled look. I followed him. Shackell went into the office and wrote out a lengthy telegram. Thank goodness, the wire would not reach Templeton until he arrived at his destination. The train was an express and did not stop until it reached the Central Station, Manchester.

"Now," I said quietly to the detective; "how do we stand?"

"You're wanted in regard to what happened this morning, miss. If you'll come with me quietly, it will make things easier for both of us."

"Have you a warrant for my arrest?" I returned; "if so I should like to see it."

"You're only making matters worse for yourself by talking. It's my duty to warn you that anything you say will be used——"

I interrupted him unceremoniously.

"It is your duty, first of all, to read the warrant; without that warrant you'll be committing an illegal act in trying to detain me."

"The warrant will be shown in good time," he said sullenly.

"That means you haven't it," I said triumphantly, "so you can do nothing."

"I can follow you, miss; also," he grinned maliciously, "I can have you detained at the police-station, as a suspicious character."

"You need not do that," I answered quickly. "I prefer your first proposal; you can follow me; I shall be glad of your protection. In fact,"—Shackell's figure showed at the top of the steps leading from the signal box—"in fact, I claim it. That man"—I pointed to Harrington—"has threatened to murder me, as he has murdered others. Ask him how Sir Herbert Masterman met with his death, ask him——"

Harrington, gathering something of the conversation, interposed:

"I give this girl in charge," he said, "for the attempted murder of Rigby Starr."

"And I demand that you shall take this man in custody for the attempted murder of Sidney Ilford, who, not an hour ago was brutally attacked by him in my presence, on the Coventry Road. At this moment Ilford lies there, suffering—perhaps dying—you must send help to him, if necessary, I will go myself to the police station and demand that he shall be fetched. His evidence will bear out mine."

The detective seemed nonplussed. I guessed Shackell had employed him in the hope that his appearance on the scene would insure my collapse. Remembering the terror a limb of the law usually inspires in the feminine breast, he had judged I should be ready to make terms, under the threat of arrest. My present attitude was quite unlooked for. The detective—his name was Alfred Smithers—realising that the affair was a more complicated one than he had at first supposed, assumed an official air.

"The two of you had better come with me to the station. The inspector can sift your charges and act upon them as he thinks best."

"Meantime Sidney Ilford is to be left to die? For shame," I turned on Smithers fiercely, "while you are arguing over red tape and official procedure, he is suffering. At any rate send someone to help him. There"—I pointed to a cab just arrived at the station to wait for the next train—"send that man to the spot I describe, with instructions to find Ilford and bring him back to the police-station."

For a moment the detective hesitated, he was not a man of quick thought or prompt action; the next, he whistled to the driver and gave him his instructions.

"Drive to the police-station and tell the inspector to send a man with you to the plantation just past the canal bridge, on the Coventry Road. By all accounts there's been a fight there and a man has been hurt. Now then, please"—he turned to me—"we'll get on to the station ourselves."

"It's absurd to bring me along," protested Shackell; "the girl's telling a cock and bull story; it's a mere quibble on her part to gain time. I've an appointment I must keep. I'll call in at the station later."

"The appointment must wait, Mr. Shackell. You must come with me to the station. If the girl is telling lies, all the easier for you to prove the truth of what you say. Come along, sir, sharp's the word."

He laid his hand on the other's arm as he spoke. In the dim light of the station lamps I saw Harrington Shackell wince at the touch. His face paled, his square jaw relaxed. For a second a glint almost of terror flickered in his eyes. Then he regained his self-control.

"I'm ready," he said; "but you're making the biggest mistake of your life all the same."

"I'm prepared to abide by the consequences, sir," returned Smithers drily, and directed our steps from the station into the road beyond.

The lights of the town shone faintly through the darkness; the road loomed black as night before us. There was not a soul to be seen; not a sound to be heard. The wheels of the station cab had passed into the distance; we three—strange trio—seemed enveloped in a stillness deep and profound. Suddenly Shackell lagged behind.

"My bootlace has come unfastened," he said, and stooped down as if to do it up.

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The next moment Smithers was staggering under the weight of a heavy blow, aimed from the back, and Shackell running swiftly down the road, was passing rapidly out of sight.

Smithers recovered himself fairly quickly, but not soon enough to overtake his assailant.

"He might have killed me," he muttered savagely; "I'll be even with him for it, I'll swear. Now then"—he turned to me sharply—"you say you saw him assault this man, Ilford. Are you prepared to swear to it?"

"Yes, but not now. Listen a minute"—I leant towards him in the darkness and spoke with all the earnestness, all the eloquence I could command. "You've made one mistake to-night, if you're not careful you'll make another. Shackell is one of a gang of swindlers; and I have interfered with their schemes. I have prevented them, so far, from carrying out a plot, far reaching in its consequences. They planned, first to ruin, then to murder Sir Noel Masterman, as they murdered his cousin, the late Sir Herbert; I heard Shackell confess to the murder, and when the time comes, I shall be ready to swear to the truth of what I say. Shackell has for the time being escaped you, but, follow my advice and you will be able to put your hand on him when you choose.

"To-night the head of the gang, the cleverest scoundrel of them all, is arriving at Manchester, with Sir Noel Masterman. Come with me and I will prove the truth of what I say. Come, and you will hold in the hollow of your hand the whole gang. Rigby Starr, who is here, dangerously ill, Templeton, whom you will meet at Manchester, and Shackell, whom you will eventually trace, by watching the others."

"And who are you to know so much of the business of the gang?" he asked.

"I was engaged as typine in their office at Great St. Helen's. They were apparently a most respectable firm, and I had no suspicions until I overheard a conversation in which Shackell confessed to the murder of Sir Herbert Masterman. The plot against his heir, Sir Noel—the man to whom I am engaged—was arranged. They had induced Sir Noel to sign a paper, by means of which, while he was abroad, they could administer his estate. I rushed from my hiding-place and snatched the paper from them. Since then they have persecuted me, tracking me from place to place, striving to entrap, to imprison me—even to take my life. But I have defeated them; I have defied them; in spite of everything I kept, and I still keep, the papers safe."

I took the precious document from its resting-place, close to my heart, and held it for Smithers to examine. He struck a match and peered at it suspiciously.

"In the meantime what has become of Sir Noel himself?"

"It was some time before I could get in communication with him," I answered. "My letters and telegrams were intercepted; at last, however, he received a letter from me stating what had happened, and telling him where I was. A meeting was arranged between us, and then, *then* at the last moment things went wrong. I fell into the hands of one of Templeton's agents—this very Sidney Ilford that Shackell attacked—and he, my lover, was decoyed by Templeton himself. Since then they have dragged him from place to place, drugging him until he lost his reason, disguised him until even I—the woman he loves—could not recognise him. Yesterday they brought him here, to the house on the hill above the quarry."

"You know this as a fact?"

"I can prove it. Ilford will substantiate all I say." Then without pausing, I told him all I had seen, all I had discovered. How Noel had escaped from the house into the quarry and how Shackell, pursuing him, had induced him to return.

"And now, to-night, Templeton has taken my lover to Manchester, there to hand him over to the safe keeping of another of the gang. Ilford told me so himself. Shackell overhearing us, attacked him in revenge."

"What brought you here?" asked the detective. "Why did you not go straight to the police-station?"

"I wanted to stop Shackell from warning Templeton that his plans were discovered. This station is the nearest place from which to send a wire—after the post office is shut. The train left Birmingham at 8.40, if I could reach the signal box before Shackell I could prevent him warning Templeton before the train left Birmingham. It was a race for life almost, a race I won. I held the wires until the train had left—the train that took Templeton and the man I love to Manchester."

"To whom did you telegraph?" persisted Smithers.

"To friends in Northampton, instructing them to wire to the police at Manchester, to meet the express and shadow Templeton and his companion until further orders."

The detective eyed me keenly.

"What do you propose doing next?" he asked. "Supposing I dropped the charge against you for the present."

"I shall take a special trian," I replied, "and go with you to Manchester, in time to save my sweetheart and arrest Templeton.

"Come," I urged, "why should you hesitate? You lose nothing by coming, and stand to gain a great deal. On my own responsibility I will promise you a hundred pounds. Sir Noel is wealthy, and not likely to grudge any money to the man who helps me."

"And who's to pay for the special?" he asked, half persuaded.

"I will. I have notes here that will more than meet the expense." He still hesitated, and, losing patience, I pushed my last argument.

"If you take me to the inspector you'll have to confess that

Templeton and Noel, pale and haggard, came up the platform together. The detective touched the former on the arm, saying, "A partner of Harrington Shackell, I believe?"

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Shackell has escaped. I shall tell him the whole story and insist he sends someone down to Manchester. As likely as not he'll choose another man, and you'll lose all the reputation of a clever capture. Don't be a fool"—I shook him in my impatience—"can't you see the sense of what I say?"

He allowed himself to be persuaded, influenced, perhaps by the seductive crackle of the packet of bank notes, which, like the document, I had withdrawn from hiding. We hurried to the station, where, backed up by Smithers' influence, the station-master was induced to let me have a "special." I handed him the two halves of a £100 note, and, reading surprise in his face, stopped all controversy as to change, by telling him to hold the balance until the next day, when I or Mr. Smithers, the detective, would call.

"We're bound to reach Manchester just behind the Birmingham express," said Smithers, when the engine was under weigh. He was roused to action by the general excitement. "Can you do it?" he asked the engine driver.

"It will be a near thing," replied the man, "but, saving accidents and stoppages, if we get a clear line, I'll just be able to get her in, but only just."

Close on the words I jumped into the carriage, followed by Smithers. The whistle sounded, screaming wildly through the night, the engine, slowly at first, with conscious dignity, steamed ahead. We had started on the journey, a journey that might end the chapter of my troubles or prove the beginning of another and a sadder one.

Now that he was committed to a definite course of action, the detective grew alternately enthusiastic and pessimistic as to the wisdom of the step he had taken. I had once more to recount the story of my engagement to Noel, my employment at the office in Great St. Helens, my discovery of the true nature of the business transacted therein.

The astute reader will have noticed I made several omissions in my first account of the matter.

I did not mention that I had taken a packet of banknotes, as well as the document, from Templeton's table, and for very sufficient reasons. I could explain much and gain credence for much of my story from Smithers, but once include the fact that I had taken the notes—no matter for what motive—and all hope of his assistance would have ended. Theft is theft in the eyes of the police; justification of the act may be proved later, before a magistrate or judge, but it does not come within their province.

I had also departed from the strict letter of the word, when I said I had told my friends in Northampton to wire the Manchester Police. The same difficulty would have arisen with them, as might even now arise with Smithers. Templeton would accuse me of stealing the notes and my case against him for the time being would collapse. As a matter of fact I had wired to Jim Goodman, begging him to telegraph to a reliable man—I knew he had friends in Manchester—to meet the express at the Central Station. Failing to see me on the platform, they were to follow Templeton and wire results to Jim, who would telegraph back to me at the post office. I felt sure the little groom would help me; for Maggie's sake, if not for mine, he would do his best to save me and Noel.

As the train rushed through the darkness, I decided on my plan of action. I would tell Smithers to keep an eye on Templeton while I, with the help of Jim's friends, would make a dash for Noel. As we neared our destination Smithers grew restive and perturbed.

"You are prepared to swear that this man, Templeton, connived at the murder of Sir Herbert?"

"I am."

"Then," said the detective slowly, "I shall take Templeton to the station on suspicion, founded on your information. You will have to repeat what you say to the inspector."

I nodded a readiness I was far from feeling.

No one could play a better game of bluff than the senior partner. Once let Smithers mention my name—and the case was lost. It was useless to hope that Noel would recognise me and substantiate my statement. If he were sufficiently himself to do that, he would have refused to go with Templeton at all

I should have to rely on Jim's friends and my own audacity.

"Whatever happens," I said, "don't lose sight of Templeton. He's a clever man and will have a dozen explanations on the tip of his tongue. Believe them or not as you like, *but don't lose sight of him.*"

"No fear of that," said Smithers; "I've no fondness for a wild goose chase, I assure you. Someone's got to be nabbed this journey, I can tell you that!" and he glanced viciously towards me.

About twenty miles from Manchester we put on speed, flashing along the lines, that gleamed like silver in the clear, cold night, rushing past hedges, fields, homesteads, and orchards with frightful velocity.

"He's sighted the express," said Smithers, and craned anxiously out of the window.

A shrill whistle sounded from the distance, trumpeting defiance. Our engine answered the challenge with a triumphant call, and dashed on through the night. I clung to the slings at the window, and my heart, my soul, my whole being concentrated in the cry upon my lips.

"Make haste! Make haste! Make haste!"

As we neared the station we slackened our pace, our imagination, tortured beyond control, saw the express draw up ahead of us by minutes; pictured the sleek figure of the senior partner, leading my lover from the station to some place, secret and remote, a place where, bereft of health, he would slowly, surely die. I stretched out longing arms to clasp him, impotent hands to draw him back.

"Noel! Noel! my darling, I am coming." The words broke from my lips, as for an instant I seemed to see my lover's face, feel the regard of his dear eyes. Then it passed from me—I was staring at Smithers' stolid countenance!

With a last defiant shriek the engine ran into the station. Barely waiting till we had stopped, I jumped to the platform, and, rushing to an official, asked if the express had come in.

He pointed to the opposite platform; the train had been in a minute, at least, the crowd of passengers already lessening. Signing to Smithers to follow, I hastened across the bridge and down the stairs. As I gained the platform, two men advanced, glancing at me observantly. They seemed hurriedly to compare notes, then came close to where I stood, as if waiting for me to speak.

"You were sent here by Jim Goodman?" I asked.

"That's so, miss," answered the elder of the two, a square-shouldered, brawny-looking person, who suggested a professional pugilist.

"Tell me what you want done, and me and my mate will carry it through."

I nodded comprehension, and searched the platform eagerly for Noel and the senior partner.

Smithers, at my elbow, looked apprehensive, almost suspicious, as the time went by without a sign or token that I had found them. At last, just as doubt had changed to fear, Templeton, benevolent as ever, came into view.

His arm linked in Noel's, he accommodated his steps to the other's dragging pace, regarding him with a perfect simulation of sympathy.

Noel, no longer with the disguising beard and moustache, but, his face pale and haggard, was strangely altered, and his eyes wore a vacant, stupid look.

I called the more sturdy of my assistants to attention.

"You see that man," I pointed to Noel, "leaning on the stout person's arm? When I give the signal, I want you and your friend to seize hold of him, and take him outside the station, put him in a cab, and wait till I join you. There will be a row, I have no doubt, but you mustn't mind that. Follow my instruction, and I'll see you don't lose, whatever happens."

"What about the stout party, miss?"

"Take no notice of him, my friend"—I pointed to the detective—"will see to him. He belongs to the police," I added softly, "and he thinks you do, too, don't forget." The big man smiled, and chuckled understanding, repeating the message to his comrade.

"Now then, Mr. Smithers," I cried excitedly, "there's your man. "Look—coming towards us, with Sir Noel—

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that is Sir Noel—leaning on his arm. Templeton? Of course it's Templeton, the head of the gang, who murdered Herbert Masterman; now's your time"—and I gave the renowned Smithers a gentle push.

"Richard Templeton, of Great St. Helen's? I think," said the detective, touching the senior partner lightly on the arm.

"That's my name," was the quiet reply. "Who are you, and what is your business?"

For answer, the detective handed him a card, bearing his name—and describing his calling.

"I believe you are a partner of Mr. Harrington Shackell?"

"Yes." Templeton's face whitened, but his self-control remained unshaken.

"Doubtless you can furnish us with certain information respecting Mr. Shackell. An attempt has been made on the life of a man named Sidney Ilford, in which your partner is concerned."

"Does Ilford himself accuse my partner?"

Smithers paused. "He is not yet in a condition to be examined," he replied slowly. "This lady"—he motioned towards me, hiding behind the substantial figure of Jim's friend—"this lady was an eye-witness of the affair. Miss Gillespie, please come forward."

This of course let the cat out of the bag, with a vengeance.

I did not wait for Templeton's reply, "That lady is a thief, who stole money when in my employment," but gave my friends the signal to join in.

The platform was empty—save for our little group—not even an official was in sight, the place for the moment deserted.

"Now," I whispered, "quick!" and, darting like a flash across the platform, and out of the station, left Jim's friends to follow on with Noel.

They managed the business in a masterly fashion. The brawny gentleman, I afterwards heard, occupied himself with Templeton, rolling the senior partner over, much as a big dog serves an impertinent puppy, while his young friend collared poor Noel and half-led, half-carried him to where in a frenzy of impatience I waited with a cab.

"Get in quick," he cried, bundling first me, then my lover, into the vehicle, "my pal's having a row with the 'tec, it will mean a night's lodging for him in a cell, I'm thinking. However, you can see to that to-morrow; where shall he drive to, miss?"

"To some hotel," I answered. "I don't mind which. Tell him to hurry, he must get away before the others see us."

With a nod, he gave the man the necessary directions, "Blank's Hotel will suit you," he said. "I shall look you up to-morrow, and tell you about Sam. Good-night, miss," and he walked off.

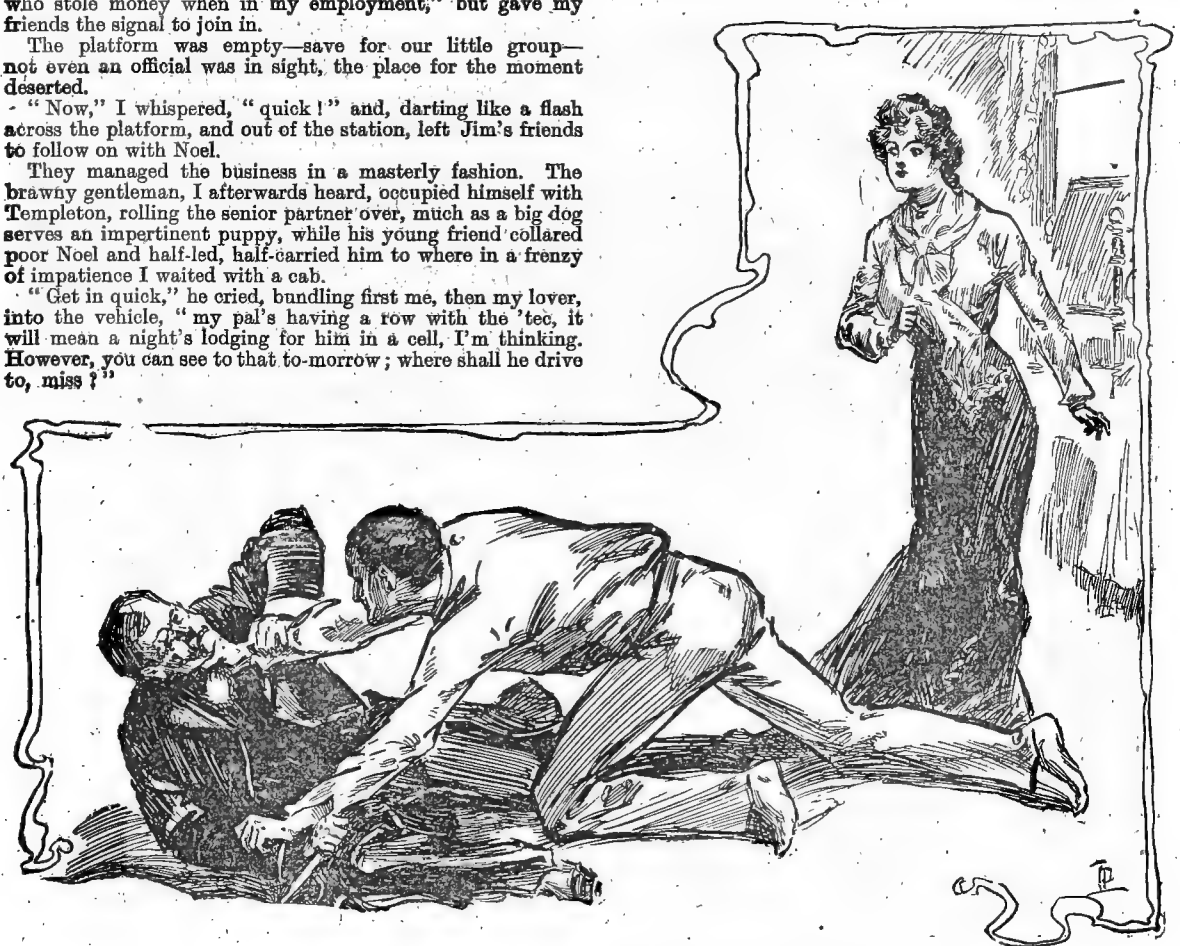
For a moment I felt I could not let him go, I had risen to call him back, to appeal to him to stay, but he had disappeared already from sight. I was left to make my last fight for life and liberty, alone! Noel, dull and impassive, drugged into a state of indifference, strange and pitiable to witness, could take no part in what ensued. It rested with me to hold our enemies at bay until—until—he became once more the Noel I knew and loved.

The cab drove rapidly along the road, and turning round a side street, drew up at a quiet-looking place, bearing the legend, "Blank's Hotel."

I paid cabby his fare, and induced Noel to accompany me up the steps. He was in a state of semi-stupor, and I had difficulty to make him realise what I wanted him to do.

The hotel people regarded both of us with surprise, not to say suspicion. I got over that, however, by announcing Noel's name and station.

"Sir Noel Masterman is recovering from an illness," I explained, "and is going abroad. We should have gone on



Noel grappled with Harrington Shackell, and hurled him to the ground.

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to Liverpool to-night but he could not stand the fatigue, so we decided to break the journey here."

We were shown to a comfortable suite of rooms, and, having established Noel in an arm-chair by the fire, I summoned a messenger and sent him for the nearest doctor.

It was some little time before the medico made his appearance, and Noel had shown signs of feverish excitement, infinitely more alarming than his previous insensibility. I told the doctor briefly what had occurred.

"Sir Noel has been stopping with some people whom I suspect of foul play. In my belief they have administered some strong opiate to him. That is the only way I can account for his appearance."

The doctor made a close and careful scrutiny, and at last gave it as his opinion that Noel was suffering from the action of a powerful drug, well-known in Eastern countries, but little used in England.

"Its effects are very marked, but the action is not lasting. The patient becomes alternately excited and morose, his mind, for the time being, is disordered, and is incapable of connected thought."

"He seems to have lost the power of recognition," I said, with a catch in my voice. "Will his memory come back?"

"As the drug wears off, his memory will return. There will be, I hope, some slight improvement by to-morrow morning if he has a good night's rest. I will send round a draught that should insure some hours of healthy sleep, but"—the doctor spoke impressively—"on no account must he be disturbed. If he is suddenly roused, the result might be disastrous to his mental health."

"Nothing shall wake him," I answered earnestly. "I will sit up with him all night."

The doctor suggested I might like a nurse, but I had learnt by bitter experience, the risk I ran from trusting strangers, and gave a decided negative to the proposal.

By the time the draught arrived, and Noel, dozing on the sofa, had been induced to swallow it, it was close on two o'clock. I made up the fire, and, drawing a chair close to the couch, commenced my vigil.

In his sleep Noel's face had regained something of its wonted expression. The mouth had fallen into the tender lines I knew so well, the brow was smooth, the cheeks had lost their ashen pallor. The tears sprang to my eyes as I watched him. How greatly he had suffered since that day—how long ago—when he bade me farewell in the office at Great St. Helen's.

What strange and terrible things had happened! All the sorrow of the past weeks came back to me. But—the thought gave me courage to endure what ever else might come upon me—at last we were together—my sweetheart and I! Changed he was, so changed from the tender lover I had known, that it was pain to hear him speak; but that would pass away. Soon, very soon, the cloud would lift from his dear eyes. To-morrow—did not the doctor say—to-morrow?—he would know me once again. I dare not face the thought that the insensibility might still continue. To-morrow, if not to-night, we should be traced, and spurred on by the enmity of Templeton, Smithers might arrest me. No use for me to plead I was defending Noel's rights, when I took the notes, if Noel could not substantiate my story. I set my teeth, and vowed, that come what might, nothing should separate me from my lover, and yet what chance had I against them all? How could I hope to hold my own against them? I rested my head beside his on the cushion, and the tears, unchecked, fell from my tired eyes. I had so longed for Noel—for a touch of his hand, the sound of his voice. I had so hungered for his help and his protection, and now, now—I had found him, he did not know the woman who had dared so greatly for his sake.

After awhile, the tears stopped, I felt weak and tired, too tired to lift my head. Against my will, against my inclination, my eyes closed. Sleep, catching me unawares, threw her cloak of silence round about me. I slipped into a slumber, sound and deep.

I woke with a sense of apprehension and alarm. The fire had lost its ruddy glow, and smouldered, a dull, black heap in the grate. The lamp burnt dimly, the air felt raw and chill. Suddenly I remembered with a thrill of self-reproach, that I had forgotten to lock the door. It stood ajar, doubtless that accounted for the draught. I rose from my seat to cross the room, and shut and bolt the door.

As I stood drowsy, and with eyes yet dim from sleep, a heavy hand clasped me by the arm; I was pushed, slowly but surely back into the chair.

I did not cry out, the doctor's warning against rousing Noel suddenly from his sleep, set a seal upon my lips. Looking up I gazed at the face of my assailant, silent and grim he stood before me, his grip tightening upon my arm, his eyes met mine.

"Shackell!" The name broke from me in a hoarse whisper.

"The notes," he said slowly, and bent nearer, "the notes, or——" He raised his right arm, and I caught the flash of steel. I pointed to a table by the window, and signed that he would find them in the drawer. I reckoned on his falling into the trap, and leaving me, to seek the money. In which case I could have rung the bell and summoned the night porter.

"And the document," he asked again, "the power of attorney?"

I motioned once more towards the table. For a moment he hesitated, then with a sudden jerk pulled me up on to my feet.

"Come and find them," he said, and dragged me to the table. Noel gave a slight stir, as if rousing. Instinctively I put my finger to my lip.

"Don't wake him," I whispered; "for Heaven's sake don't wake him."

"Give me the notes and the paper, then," was the reply.

Thus urged, I ransacked the table drawer, turning over the contents in order to gain time. The paper and the notes for once had left my possession. I had slipped them under Noel's pillow, that he might find them there when he woke—to consciousness and understanding.

Had I still retained them, I doubt not I should have yielded them to Shackell. Weighed against Noel's recovery they sank into insignificance. He could recall the paper so soon as he recovered, and his recovery—partially at least—was hoped for the next morning. As things were, however, it was impossible for me to give them up, I dare not run the risk of waking Noel; the penalty of disturbing him would be too great.

"They are gone," I said at last, "someone must have taken them."

"Who could have taken them?" he jeered, and tightened his hold upon my arm.

"You came in without rousing me; someone else may have done the same thing. Perhaps Templeton himself has been here."

"Drop that," he said impatiently, "Templeton's not been within a yard of the place. You have the papers somewhere, and you've got to give them up, or——" He glanced significantly at the couch.

"Wake him if you choose," I said defiantly, for all my fear; "but you'll be the first to regret it if you do. If he's disturbed he'll be like a madman; there'll be no quieting him. The place will be roused, and you'll be discovered."

He knew as well as I the truth of what I said, and the reflection goaded him to fury.

"Give them up," he said, still speaking in a low, hoarse whisper, "or I'll take them from you."

"They are not on me," I replied.

"That's a lie, you always carry them about with you. Give them to me——" Maddened at my resistance, he seized me by the throat, forcing me against the wall. His eyes blazed into mine, his mouth tightened into the line of hate I knew so well. Into his face there crept the look of murder I had seen it wear on the day he had killed Sir Herbert.

He raised his right hand, and the flash of steel came between me and the light. He would kill me, and then, blind fool, he would discover it was all in vain. I tried to stop him, tried to clutch at his wrist, strove to speak, to scream, but the iron

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grip of his fingers at my throat choked me; my feeble strength was powerless against his.

Was I to die? Was this to be the end of all my struggles? My eyes turned despairingly toward Noel; I would have waked him without compunction, if I could. But I was powerless—and he slept on.

Throwing myself forward, I managed to drop upon my knees, but the alteration in my attitude did little for me. With a muttered execration, Shackell swore that he would finish matters once and for all. His arm shot up, another moment and the knife—the pitiless, cruel knife, would descend—another moment——

Sudden as a flash of light a tall figure launched itself between us, and, grappling with Shackell, hurled him to the ground.

"Noel! Noel!" I screamed, half in anguish, half in triumph—and flying to the bell, pealed it again and yet again.

The room filled as in an instant with strange faces. A babel of cries and screams rang through the place. The floor seemed to give way beneath me, I was falling, falling—and then two strong arms caught and held me, and a voice, my lover's voice, bade me look up.

And I knew as his eyes met mine that my journey was over—the pursuit of Sara had ended at last!

* * * *

I always have to add a sort of postscript when telling my adventures, and now when, for the first time they are in print, I suppose I must do the same. Noel did not soon regain his normal health, the sudden spurt of strength, physical and mental—which my danger had called forth, left him in a terrible state of nervous depression. He was haunted by the fear that we should again be separated, and nothing would satisfy him but an immediate marriage.

I conceded the point, and, waiving my trousseau, became his wife—with Maggie and Jim at my wedding to wish us joy.

The last named faithful couple soon followed our example, and set up housekeeping on Noel's wedding gift.

The firm of Templeton & Co., long since dissolved, met with a portion, at least, of their deserts. Shackell was sent to prison for seven years, as a result of his attack on me, but in regard to the murder of Sir Herbert, he escaped all penalty.

The evidence, in the opinion of experts, was not strong enough to convict! There were, these clever lawyers said, no proofs of his guilt.

As if his own words were not sufficient to hang a man twice over!

The senior partner escaped to the Continent where he continued his nefarious schemes, until recently, when he was arrested by the French police and sent to prison.

Sidney Ilford, quite recovered from Shackell's brutal attack, has returned to a more reputable way of living since the break-up of the gang. Noel gave him the £100 I had promised at Nuneaton, and another £50 besides.

Rigby Starr has, for the present, disappeared from view; one day he will doubtless reappear—in the annals of the police court.

Lesbia Moran and her faithful Arthur reaped the reward of their constancy. Careful nursing restored to her some measure of health, though she will never be strong again. They still live in Birmingham, and Arthur is the manager of a flourishing business. He obtained his wife's fortune with very little trouble from his uncle, Truscot being too clever a man not to know when he was beaten. He wrote me a charming letter of congratulation on my marriage.

For the rest, I am the happiest woman imaginable and—a last word—I am even reconciled to my red hair—for Noel admires it!

The End.

NEXT WEEK—

. . In Our Grand Xmas Number . .

STARTS—

"DUPES OF DESTINY."

By BLANCHE EARDLEY. Author of "THE BOND BETWEEN."

The Sad Tale of Two Lives Made Wretched.

"DID she really love him?" He had just finished reading her letter, and there was a numb feeling about his heart as he asked himself the question. She expressed herself in such precise, formal terms, that to his ardent temperament her love—if love it were—seemed a mean thing, pale and cold.

"You say you have at last won a position, and ask me to join you at once. Are you quite sure that you truly want me; or is it only that you desire to remain true to the words you spoke when we parted one year ago? Am I still necessary to your happiness? Reflect well before you answer. To form a life partnership is a serious thing, and should not be done without much consideration."

These words concluded her letter. For a year he had lived a lonely life in a strange land, and in that time, by dint of hard work, had become a leading young solicitor in a rising town. How he had loved the girl who had remained, and who had written him so unsatisfactory a letter! But it was all over now. He could never think of linking himself for life to an icicle.

The girl waited in vain. She never received an answer to her letter; but no one ever knew her anguish, for she suffered in silence. Unlike him, she sought no consolation.

Years afterwards, she saw him again, and he told her a story; sad indeed, but scarcely strange. It was a common tale enough, for a wrecked life is by no means unusual.

He had quarrelled with the other woman. He had prospered, and he intended to pass the remainder of his days in comfort, in the country of his youth. All these things he told the girl, and then he dared to speak to her of a vague hope which he had for some time cherished. He spoke passionately, without careful choice of words, as men do when swayed by strong emotions. He told her how he had loved her all the long years, and that without her his "life would be lonely beyond endurance. Would she come to him even now?" In the past her seeming coldness had chilled him and driven him to do a foolish thing. But he had bitterly repented, and he realised now how blind he had been. "Take me to your heart again," he cried.

And as the girl listened her soul became filled with a great tenderness, and her eyes were moist as she thought of what might have been. But in justice to herself she felt that she could not consent to pass her life with a man so little fitted to understand her. He had thought her cold and selfish when her every thought had been for him. Something of the old-time love revived as she talked with him, but her better judgment warned her against acceding to his wishes.

Gently, with a woman's softness, she told him that the past was dead for ever, and begged him to put an end to his pleading. "Leave me," she said, "for what you ask me to do would surely make you unhappy. You are lonely now, and you think that you love me; but your love would not endure. It would die again as it died befor."

And when he heard her he ceased to recall painful memories. His pride was hurt, and he was very angry. With him vanity was ever dominant, and once more he failed to appreciate the depth of her nature. He only understood that he had been refused. The woman he had desired so strongly had had the power to resist him. Deeply mortified he turned and left her. As he walked away with head erect and eyes flashing with rage, the woman was well-nigh overcome with a great yearning to call him back and clasp him in her arms. But she remained alone.

And so they parted for all time.

Oliver Fiske.

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It was Safer Not to.

She: "Now let me play you the 'Moonlight Sonata.'" He: "I beg of you don't. That thing is responsible for my having twice become engaged—inadvertently, as it were. I prefer to do it deliberately the next time."

Jealous Creature!

Kitty: "Fred called me a dream last evening." Bertha: "How funny! It was only last week Fred was telling me what awful dreams he had."

A Natural Question.

"Has that young man who wants to marry you any money?" "Money! He gave me this cluster diamond brooch studded with pearls." "Yes, I know. Has he any money left?"

He Mistook her Meaning.

Clara: "Oh, John, what lovely flowers! They look as if they had just been gathered. Why, there's a little dew upon them!" John (somewhat embarrassed): "Due upon them! Not a penny, Clara, I assure you, not a penny!"

He Knew How to Do it.

Mrs. C.: "Doctor, you were at the last illness of my eldest boy?" Doctor: "Yes." Mrs. C.: "You also tended professionally to my first husband, who died?" Doctor: "Yes." Mrs. C.: "Well, my second husband is ill and I would like you to see him through, too."

She Had No Right to Publish the Banns.

"But I can't marry you, Charlie," she said sadly. "Don't say that, darling! Oh, don't say that! Why can't you?" "Because, Charlie, I am neither a minister nor a registrar, and have no authority." Then the soul of Charlie was quieted and a great light shone round about him.

A Very Hard World.

"Mamma," asked six-year-old Flossie one day, "if I get married will I have to have a husband like pa?" "Yes," replied the mother, with an amused smile. "And if I don't get married will I have to be an old maid like Aunt Kate?" "Yes." "Mamma"—after a pause—"it's a hard world for us women, isn't it?"

She was Disappointed.

Mr. Allstyle (gazing out of the window): "Well, I declare! If there doesn't go Brown with the woman to whom he was engaged long before his marriage. They used to say he loved——" Mrs. Allstyle (rushing to the window): "Where! Where! Let me see!" Mr. Allstyle: "There, see?" Mrs. Allstyle: (reaching the window) "Ah—pshaw—why, that's his wife!" Mr. Allstyle: "Exactly."

That Settled it.

They were fond of each other, very, and had been engaged. But they quarrelled, and were too proud to make it up. He called a few days ago at her father's house—to see the old gentleman on business, of course. She answered his ring at the door bell. Said he: "Ah, Miss Jones, I believe? Is your father within?" "No, sir," she replied; "father is not in at present. Do you wish to see him personally?" "Yes, miss," was his bluff response, feeling that she was yielding, "on very particular personal business," and he proudly turned to go away. "I beg your pardon," she called after him as he reached the lowest step, "but who shall I say called?" He never smiled again.

Couldn't Scare her.

"You are sure you won't be nervous at the altar?" said he before the wedding. "I never have been yet," replied the widow with touching modesty.

A Businesslike Suggestion.

He was looking for a rich wife and thought he was on the trail. "I love you," he said in rich, warm tones, "more than I can tell you in words." "You'd better try figures," she replied coldly, for she was not so green as she looked.

He Had Good Cause.

Stranger: "You are the only gentleman in the room." Guest: "What do you mean, sir?" Stranger: "When I tripped in the dance and went sprawling on the floor, tearing my fair partner's dress, you were the only one in the room who did not laugh." Guest: "The lady is my wife, and I paid for the dress."

She Thought they were Marriage Knots.

Pretty Passenger: "Captain, did the ship really make twenty knots every hour last night?" The Captain: "Yes, miss." Pretty Passenger: "And what do you do with so many knots?" The Captain (gruffly): "Toss 'em overboard." Pretty Passenger: "Oh, how queer! I thought the sailors had to untie them during the day."

A Wicked Confession.

"Do you mean to say you never loved any man in all your life?" asked an impertinent friend who had led Miss Oldmayde into some indiscreet confessions. "Not a single one!" replied Miss Oldmayde, emphatically. "Gracious!" exclaimed the caller, excitedly. "You don't mean to imply that you have ever loved any married men, I hope?"

Diplomacy.

"Anything wrong with the coffee this morning, John?" "No, it's good enough." "Porridge all right?" "I haven't any fault to find with the porridge." "Bacon cooked all right?" "I don't see anything wrong with the bacon." "No complaint to be made about anything?" "No." "John, I wish you would let me have a sovereign to buy some ribbons."

Did Not Love him that Much.

"Miss Gladys," said old Moneybags, "if my suit is not agreeable to you, say so frankly, but do not, I beg of you, tell me that old, old story that you will always look upon me as a brother." "Sir," replied the lovely maiden, as her eye lit up with the deathless flame of a pure young heart's deep devotion. "I do not love you well enough for a brother, but I have no objection to taking you as a husband."

Where Hubby Laughed.

Husband (kindly): "My dear, you have nothing decent to wear, have you?" Wife (with alacrity): "No, indeed, I haven't; not a thing. I'd be ashamed to be seen anywhere. My very newest party dress has been worn three times already." Husband: "Yes, that's what I told Bliffkins when he offered me two tickets for the theatre to-night. I knew if I took them they'd be wasted, so I just got one. You won't mind if I hurry off?"

A Woman's Way.

She: "Oh, don't you think Miss Browne is the nicest girl in the world?" He: "Why, yes, of course, if you think so." She: "And her eyes; oh, don't you think they are splendid?" He: "Very." She: "And hasn't she the prettiest little mouth, and the kindest, dearest face?" He: "Yes, indeed." She: "And then, isn't she graceful, and doesn't she waltz divinely?" He: "Of course she does." She: "And isn't she the sweetest, sweetest girl?" He: "Yes, indeed." She: "And don't you think she knows an awful lot; and don't you—oo-ooo-ooo t-hi-n-k——?" He: "Why, what's the matter, Mabel?" She: "O-h! I t-h-o-u-g-h-t y-o-u l-o-v-e-d me, Tom?" He: "Why, so I do." She: "W-e-l-l, then, how can you bear to talk so a-b-o-u-t t-h-a-t h-o-r-r-i-b-l-e o-l-d, u-g-l-y Browne girl?"

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RED TULIPS.

A Pretty Tale of Charity and Love.

"PLEASE, ma'am, will you give me one of them red tulips?"

The eager voice woke Helen from her reverie, and, looking up, she saw a little girl holding on to the iron railing with one hand, while the other pointed to a bed of red and yellow tulips waving in the sunshine.

"I can't give you one, child, for they don't belong to me," answered Helen, looking at the wistful face, over which her words brought a shadow of disappointment.

"I thought perhaps you lived in this house, or knew those who did; and I *do* want one of them flowers dreadful bad," said the girl, regarding the gay tulips with a look of intense desire.

"I wish I could give you one; but it would be stealing, you know. Perhaps, if you go and ask the owner he may let you have one—there are so many."

And having offered all the consolation in her power, Helen went on, busy with a certain disappointment of her own, which just then weighed very heavily on her girlish heart.

Half-an-hour later, as she came down the street on the opposite side, she saw the same girl sitting on a doorstep, still gazing at the tulips with hopeless admiration.

The child looked up as she approached, and recognising the pretty young lady who had spoken kindly to her, smiled and nodded so confidingly, that Helen could not resist stopping to say:

"Did you ask over there?"

"Yes, ma'am; but the girl said 'No,' and told me to clear out; so I came over here to sit and look at the flowers since I can't have none," she answered, with a patient sigh.

"You shall have some!" cried Helen, remembering how easily she could gratify the innocent longing of the poor child, and feeling a curious sympathy with all disappointed people. "Come with me, dear; there is a flower-shop round the corner, and you shall have a nosegay of some sort."

Such wonder, gratitude, and delight shone in Betty's face that Helen felt rejoiced for her small kindness.

As they walked, she questioned her about herself, and quite won her heart by the friendly interest expressed in Betty's mother, Betty's kitten, and Betty's affairs generally.

When they came to the flower-shop, little Bet felt as if she had got into a fairy tale; and when Helen gave her a pot with a blue hyacinth and a rosy tulip blooming prettily together, she felt as if a lovely fairy had granted all her wishes in the good old way.

"It's lovely! and I don't know how to thank you, miss. But mother takes in washing, and she'll love to do yours specially well, 'cause you done this for me!" cried Betty, embracing the flower-pot in one hand, and squeezing Miss Helen's with the other.

Helen promised to come and see her new friend, and, when they parted, kept turning round to watch the little figure trotting up the hill, often pausing to turn and show her a beaming face, all smiles and delight, as Betty threw her kisses, and hugged the tulip like a treasure of great price.

When she vanished, Helen said to herself, with a smile and a sigh:

"There, I feel better for that little job, and it is a comfort to know that someone has got what she wants, though it's not I."

Some weeks later, when Helen was preparing to go into the country for the summer, and wanted certain dresses cleaned, she remembered what Betty had said about her mother, and had a fancy to see how the child and her flowers prospered.

She found them in a small, poor room, hot and close, and full of washtubs and flat-irons. The mother was busy at her work, and Betty sat by the one window.

When she saw the face at the door she jumped up and clapped her hands, crying delightedly:

"Oh, mammy, it's my lady! my dear, pretty lady truly come at last!"

Such a welcome made friends of the three at once, and Mrs. Simms gladly undertook the work Helen offered.

"And how are the flowers?" asked the young lady, as she rose to go.

"Only leaves now, miss; but I take good care of 'em, and mammy says they will bloom again next Spring," answered Betty, showing her poor little garden, which consisted of the hyacinth, tulip, and one stout dandelion, blooming bravely in an old tea-pot.

"That will be a long time to wait, won't it?"

"Yes'm; but I go and take peeps at them flowers in the shop, and once the man gave me a pink that hadn't no stem. Maybe he will again, and so I'll get along," said Betty, softly touching her cheerful dandelion as if it were a friend.

"I wish you would come and see my garden, little Betty. You should pick as many flowers as you liked and play there all day long. I suppose your mother couldn't spare you for a visit, could she?"

Betty's face shone at the blissful thought; then the smile faded, and she shook her head, saying steadily:

"No, miss, I don't think she could; for she gets so tired, I like to help her by carrying home the clothes. Some other day maybe I can come."

Something in the patient little face touched Helen, and made her feel as if she had been too busy thinking of her own burden to help others bear theirs.

She longed to do something, but did not know how till Mrs. Simms showed her the way by saying, as she stroked the frizzly little head that leant against her:

"Betty thinks a heap of flowers, and seems to get lots of comfort out of 'em. She's a good child, and some day we are going to see the country—soon as ever we can afford it."

"Meantime the country must come to you," said Helen, with a happy thought shining in her face. "If you are willing, I will make a nice little plan with Betty, so she can

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have a nosegay all the time. I shall come to town twice a week, and if Betty will be at the corner of the park every Wednesday and Saturday morning at ten o'clock, I'll have a nice nosegay for her."

If she had proposed to present the child with all the sweets of a confectioner's shop, it would not have given her greater joy.

Betty could only dance a jig of rapture among the wash-tubs, and Mrs. Simms thanked Helen with tears in her eyes.

"Ain't she just like a good fairy, mammy?" said Betty, settling down in an empty clothes-basket to brood over the joyful prospect.

"No, she's an angel," answered mammy, folding her tired hands for a moment's rest when her guest had gone.

Helen heard both question and answer, and sighed to herself:

"I wish somebody else thought so."

When the first Wednesday came, Betty was at the meeting-place half-an-hour too soon.

That meeting was a pretty sight, though only an old apple-woman saw it.

Helen was half-hidden behind a great nosegay of June roses, lilies-of-the-valley, sweet jonquils and narcissus, sprays of tender green and white lilac plumes.

Betty gave one cry of rapture as she clutched it in both hands, trembling with delight, for never had she dreamt of owning such a treasure as this.

"All for me! All for me!" she said, as if it were hard to believe. "Oh, what will mammy say?"

"Run home and see. Never mind thanks. Get your posy into water as soon as you can, and come again Saturday," said Helen, as she went on, with a nod and a smile, while Betty raced home to fill every cup and plate they owned, and make a garden of the poor little room where mamma worked all day.

All through the summer, rain or shine, these two friends kept tryst, and though Helen seemed no nearer getting *her* wish, this little flower mission of hers helped her to wait.

Strangers watched the pretty girl with her nosegays, and felt refreshed by the winsome sight. Friends joked her about her little Flora, and would-be lovers pleaded in vain for one bud from her bouquets.

She found real happiness in this small duty, and did it faithfully for its own sake, little dreaming that someone was tracking her by the flowers she left behind her in the highways of her life.

For, seeing how much these fragrant messengers were to Betty and her mother, Helen fell into the way of taking flowers to others also, and never went to town without a handful to leave here and there. By some sick-bed, in a child's hand, or on a needle-woman's table.

And all unconsciously these glimpses of poverty, pain, neglect and loneliness taught her a lesson she never learnt before. For the gay girl was discovering that life was not a summer day, and she was something better than a butterfly.

When autumn came, and she returned to her home, her young friends discovered that Helen's quiet season had improved her wonderfully, for behind the belle they found a tender-hearted woman.

She took up her old life where she laid it down apparently; but to those who knew her best there was a difference now, for, in many unsuspected ways, pretty Helen was unconsciously fitting herself for the happiness that was coming to her very soon.

Betty helped to bring it, though she never guessed that her measles was a blessing to her dear lady. When Dr. Strong, finding a hot-house bouquet beside her bed, very naturally asked where it came from, Betty told all about Miss Helen, from the time of her red tulips to the fine tea-roses in her hand.

"She has lots of bunches like these sent to her, and she gives 'em to us poor folks. This one was for her to take to a splendid ball, but she kept it fresh, and came herself to give it to me. Isn't she kind?"

"Very, to you, but rather cruel to the gentlemen who hope to see her wear their gifts, for one evening at least," answered the doctor, examining the bouquet with an odd smile

"Oh, she does keep some, when they are from folks she likes. I was there one day when some violets came in with a book, and she wouldn't give me one. But I didn't care at all, for I had two great posies, all red geranium and pinks, instead.

"She likes violets, then?" and the doctor gently patted Betty's head, as if he had grown suddenly fond of her.

"I think she does, for when I went the next week, that very bunch was in the vase on her table all dead and yellow, and she wouldn't let me fling it away when I wanted to put in a rose from the bunch she gave me."

"You are a grateful little girl, my dear, and a very observing child. Now keep warm and quiet, and we'll have you again trotting off to Miss Helen in a week or so."

The doctor stole a sprig of rose geranium out of Betty's last bouquet, and went away looking as if he had found something even sweeter than that in the dingy room where his patient lay.

Next day Miss Helen had fresh violets in the vase on her table, and fresh roses blooming on her cheeks. Dr. Strong advised her not to visit Betty, as there was fever in the neighbourhood, but kindly called every day or two to let Helen know how her little friend was getting on.

After one of these calls the doctor went away, saying to himself, with an air of tender pride and satisfaction:

"I was mistaken, and judged too hastily last year. Helen is not what I thought her, a frivolous, fashionable beauty, but a sweet, sensible girl, who is tired of that empty life, and quietly tries to make it beautiful and useful in the best and truest way. I hope I read the blue eyes right, and I think I may venture to say now what I dared not say last year."

After that same visit Helen sat thinking to herself, with a face full of happiness and humility:

"He finds me improved, so I have not waited in vain; and I believe I shall not be disappointed after all."

It is evident that the doctor did venture and that Helen was not disappointed, for on the first day of June, Betty and her mother, all in their best, went to a certain church and were shown to the best seat in the gallery, where several other humble friends were gathered to see their dear Miss Helen married.

Betty was in high spirits, with yellow ribbons in her hat, and lighted up the seat like an animated rainbow.

Full of delight and importance was Miss Betty, for she had been in the midst of the festive preparations, and told glowing tales to her interested listeners while they waited for the bride.

When the music sounded, Betty held her breath and rolled up her eyes in a pious rapture.

When a general stir announced the grand arrival, she leant so far over the gallery that she would have gone head first, if her mother had not caught her legs; and when the misty white figure passed up the aisle, Betty audibly remarked:

"If she had wings, she'd look just like an angel, wouldn't she, mammy?"

She sat like a little statue all through the service; but she had something on her mind, and the moment the bridal couple turned to go, Betty was off, scrambling downstairs, dodging under people's arms, hopping over ladies' skirts, and steadily making her way to the carriage in waiting for the happy pair.

The door had just closed, when a little face, with a yellow hat surrounding it like a glory, appeared at the window.

An arm was thrust in, offering a bunch of flowers, and a breathless voice cried resolutely:

"Oh, please do let me give 'em to my lady! They bloomed a-purpose for her, and she *must* have 'em!"

Those outside saw a sweet face bend to kiss the little one, but they did not see what happened afterwards, for Helen, remembering a year ago, said, smiling:

"Patient waiters are no losers. The poor child has red tulips all her own at last."

"And I have mine," answered the happy doctor, gently kissing his young wife as the carriage rolled away, leaving Betty to retire in triumph.

Louise M. Alcott.

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POWERFUL ROMANCE.

A CRIMINAL MILLIONAIRE

By GEORGE GRIFFITH.

Author of "The Angel of the Revolution," "Olga Romanoff," "The Lake of Gold," etc., etc.

PRINCIPAL CHARACTERS IN THIS STORY:

Isolo Staunton, a criminal millionaire, who was once a convict on the Chincha Islands. He is the ruler of a kingdom under the sea, of the existence of which nobody knows. Here he forges in great number coins of every rationality. With the wealth he is amassing he intends to form a United States of South America and to make himself President.

Mercedes Staunton, his beautiful daughter, who falls in love with

Wilfrid Ellerton, a young man of whom Isolo Staunton is greatly afraid because he holds it in his power to send the millionaire back as a convict to the Chincha Islands. So Staunton secures Ellerton on board the *Isola*, his magnificent yacht, and consigns him to the Underworld. It is then given out that the young man has fallen overboard and been drowned.

Don Ramiero Valdez y Valdivia.—The right-hand friend and confidant of Staunton. He carries out the kidnapping of Ellerton.

M. Herarra.—The viceroy of Staunton in the Underworld.

Stanislaus Smith.—A detective, who is endeavouring to find the perpetrators of the colossal coin frauds. He lives a double life as Herr de Ronski, the famous musician, but only his wife and daughter, Paula, and Arthur Dennison, a Treasury solicitor, know of this.

Derrick Kesteven.—The partner of Staunton in all his great schemes. He has a beautiful daughter, named Cora.

Captain Percy Iddison and Lady Maud Hyam.—Two engaged persons who have suspicions about the unscrupulousness of Staunton.

Janet Yuill.—A nurse who is taken on board the *Isola* to tend Mercedes, who falls ill when she hears of the alleged death of Ellerton. She there meets her husband, Herbert Darfield, once Arthur Culworth, criminal, and her suspicions are aroused.

TWENTY-THIRD CHAPTER.

A Luncheon Party.

MERCEDES had now so completely recovered her physical health that the second nurse had been sent home, and Janet Yuill only remained in attendance on her by her own particular request.

During her convalescence she had formed an intensely strong attachment for the grave, yet gentle and beautiful, woman, whom she had first seen leaning over her bed when the light of reason dawned once more in her eyes, and it was Janet's soft voice, with its musical undertones of Scottish accent, which had welcomed her back to the world of real things.

But Janet, in addition to her affection for her lovely patient, to say nothing of the splendid terms with which Staunton had tempted her to remain, had other and deeper reasons for not leaving the *Isola*, at any rate for the time being.

Hers was one of those deep, strong woman-natures which, having once loved, can forgive anything, even dishonour, for the sake of love.

Since that terrible night on the confines of the Arctic Sea, when she had seen the snow-cap of Mount Hekla floating high up in the moon-lit sky, she had only spoken to her husband two or three times, and only once on the subject that lay nearest to their hearts.

Then, in answer to his despairing appeal, she had raised him, for the moment at least, back into the heaven which he had once shared with her by telling him that she had already forgiven him, and that, in spite of everything, she was his true wife still.

And then he had said

"I have been guilty, Janet dear, but I had repented of my crime, and I had paid bitterly for it before, it may be, the mercy of heaven brought you on board this ship; but I am in the grip of a man who never loosed his hold on what he wanted until he had done with it, and when he has done that with a man he takes good care that he shall be of no use to anyone else. Many a time I have longed to give myself up to justice and take my punishment, for it couldn't be worse than slavery like this."

"Then, why not do it, Arthur?" she had asked, "and when you are a free man again, you shall come back to me, and we will forget everything, except that we are man and wife."

"I daren't, Janet," he had answered in a frightened whisper. "I'm a prisoner for life.

"Like the others, I have more money than I can spend, and everything that man can want except honour and liberty, but to desert is death. The Señor, as they call him, never forgives. One of the officers, our second, tried to desert once, but in twelve hours he was brought back. He was kept in irons in a dark cell down below there till we got up north yonder, and then, well, I can't tell you the rest—but we never saw him again."

The conversation had been interrupted at this point by the appearance of Doctor Billaud, who, after a suspicious glance at them, had told Janet that her presence was wanted below. The next time they had met her husband had passed her a piece of twisted paper, on which she found written:

"Never be seen speaking to me alone!"

She had obeyed him, but the secret had been a heavy one for her to carry, and now that they had returned to civilisation, she had determined with all the strength of her

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resolute nature, to remain on the yacht and at any risk clear up the mystery which surrounded the beautiful and luxurious craft. It was for this reason that she had, as it were, drawn a bow at a venture, and told Captain Iddison about seeing the snowcap of Hekla during the supposed voyage from Leith to the Riviera. It was indeed a very important piece of news.

The lunch on board the yacht the day following the holding of the council of war, was a very different function from that at which the "Señor President" had entertained the South American delegates.

That, it must be confessed, had degenerated into something of the nature of an orgie, at least on the part of two or three of the eminent diplomatists.

This was as dainty and brilliant as money and taste could make it, and, moreover, it was graced by the presence of semi-royalty in the presence of the Grand Duke of Warschaua, whom Kesteven had met in the course of a mutual plunge at the tables in which his Highness had lost rather more than he could afford; while Kesteven, playing with the sublime confidence inspired by the possession of superfluous millions, had twice broken the bank.

They had met before in Paris, Vienna, and Venice, and half the smartest pleasure resorts in Europe, with the result that Miss Cora had taken a very understandable liking to him, since he was everything that the ideal Grand Duke in the later twenties might be expected to be—clean, healthy, fairly good-looking, a well-bred gentleman, and a thorough sportsman.

On his part his Highness had found very little difficulty in persuading himself that, of all the maidens whose mammas would have so gladly given them to share his name and dignity, this bright and beautiful American girl was distinctly the most desirable.

Her prospective millions may have had something to do with the preference, but that was only in grand-ducal human nature.

Be that as it may, his Highness Eugene Alexis of Warschaua formed one of the principal reasons for what Kesteven had said to Staunton after the council meeting the day before.

After the presentation had taken place before lunch, Staunton could not resist taking his partner aside and saying:

"Well, my dear fellow, I must confess that I admire your taste and judgment. Still, one can hardly help seeing the grim humour of the situation—a grand-ducal coronet, gilded by our own manufacture of the necessary article! I wonder what he would think of the millions which, of course, Cora will take him, if he knew where they came from?"

"It would be a mighty cold day for anyone who told him," replied Kesteven carelessly, as he turned away towards the little group of which his Highness and Lady Medcalf-Mears formed the centre.

Shortly afterwards the Duke began to compliment Staunton on the beauty of the *Isola*. He was a keen yachtsman himself, and owned the fastest and smartest schooner in the Bay, and, like all good sailors, looked upon this floating palace rather as a luxurious means of transit than as a real ship. Still, for what she was, he could not help admiring her, and he expressed his admiration very frankly.

"Now isn't he just good," whispered Cora to Mercedes, as she put her arm through hers and drew her away from the others. "Until I met him I had no idea they raised men like that at the other end of this effete old Europe."

"Good?" echoed Mercedes, looking up and laughing. "He seems delightful. I think I shall have to ask papa to find a nice Grand Duke for me, and then, when its all settled, you and I can be Grand Duchesses together. Don't you think we should make a very creditable pair?"

"Yes, dear, why, of course we should," replied Cora softly, "but I don't think I'd quite like to go in front of you at a Court presentation. Still, it'll be time enough to talk about coronets when they're offered us. The Grand Duke hasn't *exactly* laid his at my feet, you know. And now, tell me how you liked the concert. Isn't Paula de Ronski just too lovely for anything?"

She changed the subject from the one that interested her most for a very good reason. She was a good, honest, tender-hearted girl, utterly innocent of the nefarious fashion in which the millions which were to be hers had been won, and it hurt her sorely to hear poor Mercedes speak with such careless ignorance of the fate which had overtaken her own lover.

"Yes," replied Mercedes, looking up at the blue hills beyond the town, "do you know, Cora, that when she was singing that love-song I found myself thinking of something, I don't know what it could have been, that seemed to have been in my life once and then gone out of it again.

"Of course it can only have been a fancy of mine, and, after all, if we cannot dream while we are listening to such exquisite music as that there can't be very much of it in our souls.

"Did I tell you, Cora, that papa is going to try and get the de Ronskis to come and play and sing for us on board?"

"No," exclaimed Cora, "now that is a gorgeous idea! But do you think they'll come? They've only just begun their season here and——"

"Oh, I hope so," Mercedes interrupted. "That nice Mr. Dennison, Captain Iddison's friend, who seems to know everybody, confided to me this morning that he knows the great musician very well, and so I took him at once to papa and made him promise that he would do everything he could to help us. Wasn't that lucky?

"And if they do come we are going to have dinner in the Bay and then, as soon as the moon has got up, we shall steam out to sea and have our concert on deck. What do you think of that?"

"Think?" cried Cora, stopping short in her walk, "I guess you'll have to give me time for that, dear. The idea's quite too splendid to get a grip of all at once. Ah, Mr. Dennison, we were just talking about you. Mercedes has been telling me about the concert plan, and how you so kindly said you'd help with the Professor. Now, do—won't you?"

"Everything I can, I assure you, Miss Kesteven," he replied, and then, as he looked at Mercedes and her lovely eyes met his, joining Cora's in pleading the cause of the concert, for the first time in his professional career a thrill, not of remorse, but of keen regret passed through his soul.

This innocent, exquisitely beautiful girl, radiant with youth and health and happiness, believing herself the heiress of honestly-won millions—this was the daughter of the man he and Mr. Smith already suspected of being, not only the greatest swindler of the age, but, if that were true, the man who must be responsible for a score of deliberate murders as well.

The idea seemed hideous to him. Then he seemed to see Paula standing in her place. It was too horrible for thought.

He dismissed it and went on:

"But may I make a suggestion?"

"Why certainly you can," exclaimed Cora impetuously. And then apologetically: "I beg your pardon, Mercedes, but I'm so struck on this concert that I'm forgetting my manners."

"Nonsense!" laughed Mercedes—and, save one, he thought he had never heard so sweet a laugh. "Yes, Mr. Dennison, please do."

"Then it is this. My friend de Ronski, like most great musicians, has his little feelings, as they say, Both he and his wife are of very good old Polish stock and so I need hardly say that he is as proud as Lucifer. He is a rich man and, if he took it into his head to say 'no' a million down would not tempt him to say 'yes.' Wherefore, if Mr. Staunton would allow you, as hostess of the *Isola*, to make his personal acquaintance first——"

"Of course I should be only too delighted," replied Mercedes with a radiant smile, "I see exactly what you mean. I must prevent papa from making what one might call a business offer to him, and just invite him and his wife and daughter in a social sort of way——"

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"To meet the Grand Duke, for instance," whispered Cora, as his Highness approached them after a brief search for her charming self.

"Duke, what do you think of this?" she went on as he joined the group.

"Of what, Miss Cora?" he inquired with a bow. "It must be something of a delightful nature if it has originated on board this floating paradise. Truthfully I have been in very like a dream since I have been on board."

His English was almost perfect, but his accent made him seem so delightfully boyish that Cora would not even have had him speak American.

Then she began to rattle off the scheme of the concert, enlarging on its splendid possibilities with such an exquisite vivacity of voice, manner, and gesture that his Highness was completely dazzled and entranced long before she had finished.

"There, now," she ended with an inimitable gesture of her hands towards him which made him want to take hold of them and kiss them, "what does your Highness think of that for an improvement on the Arabian Nights Entertainment?"

The simile was not particularly exact, but it was the only one she thought of at the moment, and, as she would have put it, "it went."

"It is almost too charming a prospect to be truthful," replied the Duke, looking at her with grave, dark brown eyes in which she saw two sparks, possibly kindled by her own. "But I have taken the liberty to come to ask you if you would take what I think you call the constitutional before lunch?" he went on with a slight motion of his arm towards her.

"Why, certainly, Duke," she laughed, taking his arm, "you'll excuse me, won't you. Mercedes?"

"Of course," smiled her hostess as they walked away. "And now, Mr. Dennison," she went on, "there is only one little difficulty that I see about this very kind offer of yours. You see, papa has got some of the old South American, in fact, the Spanish ideas, and I am half Spanish. You understand me? The difficulty is one of chaperonage, and in this hideously wicked place—ah, there is my question answered at once! Here comes my beloved Janet. She nursed me, you know, when I was so ill—though I never could find out what made me ill. She has come to tell me lunch is ready, I suppose. She is just like a mother to me. I couldn't have a better chaperon, could I, Mr. Dennison?"

"Under the circumstances, certainly not," he replied, holding out his hand as Janet approached.

"Oh, you know my Janet, do you?" exclaimed Mercedes, as they shook hands.

"Yes, Iddison introduced me. Miss Yuill was out at the Front and she nursed a lot of his men until the Company stopped calling her 'Sister' and called her 'Angel' so he tells me."

"Oh, you wicked Janet!" cried Mercedes to her blushing nurse, "and you never told me a word about all that! And so you are a heroine as well as the sweetest dear that ever was.

"Now listen, I want you to do something for me; Mr. Dennison, will you kindly tell Janet all about it? I see papa beckoning to me over there."

It did not take him very long to persuade Janet to do what Mercedes had suggested, for she, too, had begun to be troubled with fears for the safety of her darling on board this mysterious craft, and when Dennison assured her that it was entirely in her interest that he desired her to make the acquaintance of the de Ronskis she consented at once.

OUR XMAS NUMBER,
ready next week, will be
full of seasonable fiction.

TWENTY-FOURTH CHAPTER.

Treason!

The de Ronskis gave another concert that night, and, of course, everyone who could resist the fatal fascinations of the Casino went to it.

When it was over Dennison managed to get away from the party and join his friend and colleague in his private room behind the stage. As he went in de Ronski was just putting his violin tenderly to rest in its case. He looked up and said:

"Ah, my friend, is it you! I saw you and your party, and also the Señor Staunton in front. I hope you all enjoyed yourselves?"

"That goes without saying," laughed Dennison as he closed the door. "If I could say so with truth I should say that you and Madame and Mademoiselle had excelled yourselves, but not even you could do that."

"That's all right," said the other, in the voice of Mr. Smith, "but I don't suppose you came here to flatter us. Any news? I know, of course, that you have been lunching and having a general good time on board the *Isola* to-day. By the way, what a lovely girl our friend Staunton's daughter is! Francesca and Paula have both fallen in love with her, and I—well, I must confess, she appeals strongly to my artistic sense. I suppose, granted that we are on the right track, that she knows nothing."

"Good heavens, man, no!" exclaimed Dennison, almost angrily. "As you know, I am not a particularly sentimental or credulous person, but I'd stake all I have or hope for in the world on her absolute innocence. The thing's inconceivable!"

"I'm glad you think so. No one would accuse me of that sort of weakness, I think, but, although I have had some queer experiences of pretty women in the criminal line, I should want very strong proof before I believe that a girl with an angel face like hers could be the accomplice of a criminal, even though he happened to be her own father."

"That is exactly the thing that I called to see you about," replied Dennison. "Have you half an hour to spare?"

"An hour, if you like. My wife and Paula have gone back with my manager to the hotel already. I shall be in town all night. And that reminds me, if you have nothing better to do when we have had our talk you might as well come with me and make the acquaintance of my colleague Trapané."

"What, Trapané of Paris? What's he doing here? Also down for a holiday?"

The other laughed in reply.

"Well," said Dennison, after a long pull at his cigar, "things seem to be getting into a bit of a tangle; more tangle than I like, in fact."

"My dear fellow, did you ever know a case worth having that wasn't tangled up? That's just what makes ours the most interesting profession on earth."

"I wasn't speaking professionally," said Dennison, leaning forward with his elbows on his knees. "You see it's this way. It is absolutely certain, I take it, that Miss Staunton knows nothing, allowing that we are right——"

"Which we are," interrupted Mr. Smith quietly.

Dennison looked hard at him and nodded.

"I thought so," he went on, "and from one point of view that makes it as bad as possible. As I told you, Staunton wants you to go and dine on the *Isola* some evening, and take part in a sort of al-fresco sea concert, and, for other professional reasons, you said you would.

"Now, Miss Staunton is enraptured with the idea, and I suggested to her this morning that, as it wouldn't be much

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use approaching Stanislas de Ronski on the business plane, she would allow me, as a friend of the family, to introduce her to your wife as hostess of the *Isola*, and invite you to dinner in a social way."

"That would be much better in every way. Of course, under the circumstances, my friend de Ronski couldn't think of charging a fee to a man whom *I* hope to lock up. Well?"

"The natural difficulty of a chaperone arose," Dennison resumed, "and it solved itself very happily by the appearance just at that moment of Miss Janet Yuill, the Sister who nursed Miss Staunton through her illness. It appears that she has formed an intense attachment for her, and she is now, I suppose, permanently installed as her companion."

"Ah," said Mr. Smith, looking up, "that is the young lady who saw the ice-cap of Hekla on the voyage from Leith to the Riviera?"

"Yes, and from what she told me later on, she is getting still more suspicious of the true nature of the *Isola*. For instance, it is a rather curious thing that she has been some days in port now and no one has seen her captain. Of course, you understand, it isn't possible for guests to make inquiries on a matter of that sort, except in quite a casual way. I asked Miss Yuill, and she told me, rather clumsily for a straightforward woman like her, that he was supposed to be confined to his room with sickness of some sort, but she looked so awkward over it that I really didn't care to press the point."

"Quite right, my dear Dennison," said Mr. Smith. "Never press a point too far. One often learns a good deal more from silence than from speech. And now as to Miss Staunton. I presume that in the first place you wish us to make her personal acquaintance, so that we may satisfy ourselves, I mean, of course, my wife and daughter, as to her innocence, so that if the crash comes there can be no question of her being involved."

"Yes, that is the first point," said Dennison, "and the second is this. Given the crash, she will, of course, be friendless. Those who would scheme and almost fight for her invitations now will turn their backs on her then.

"She will be the daughter of a convict, probably of a murderer, and she will want friends who know that she is innocent. In other words, I don't want the sins of the father to fall upon the child. It isn't fair!"

"Dennison," exclaimed Mr. Smith, getting up and filling the glasses, "you're a brick! You can rest assured that when Miss Staunton wants friends she'll find them in my house. And now it's about time we were off."

He put on his soft hat, rang the bell, and instantly became Stanislas de Ronski once more. The attendant appeared, and he ordered his brougham.

When it came round he gave an address to the driver, and as he sat down beside Dennison and the carriage rolled away smoothly on its rubber tyres, he laid his hand on his knee and said:

"For the present I should like you to hear what you are going to hear to-night as my friend and not as a Treasury official. You see, the French police work differently from the English, and at present we are the guests of the French police. Afterwards, when the time comes to act, you shall have your full share, if only for the sake of the very valuable clue you have given to us in the person of Miss Yuill. You take me, of course."

"Certainly, my dear fellow," replied Dennison. "You needn't have any fear of that. To-night I have neither official eyes nor ears. I am here on leave, and the office has nothing to do with it."

"Very well, that is quite enough," was the reply, and Mr. Smith relapsed into silence until the brougham, after a somewhat winding, up-hill course, entered a gate flanked by two dwarf palms and pulled up before the steps of a white, two-storied, verandahed house, half smothered by the luxuriant sub-tropical vegetation.

Mr. Smith opened the door and got out.

A servant standing at the bottom of the steps came forward, and said in French, with a gesture of deference:

"Monsieur Justin awaits you, sir."

"Good. Kindly tell him that I have brought a friend with me."

"*Bien, monsieur.*"

And the man led the way up the steps.

"Come along," said de Ronski, as he was now, in French, and he added in a whisper, "Don't forget that our friend Trapané is not known here."

Dennison nodded, and they entered.

The man led them upstairs, and knocked softly at a door. A voice within said, "*Entrez*," and the door opened.

De Ronski went in first, and as the door closed behind him Dennison found himself in the presence of an amiable-looking old gentleman with thin, curly grey hair and straggly white beard and moustache—and, to his utter amazement, Doctor Eymar Billaud, to whom he had been introduced at lunch that day as Isolo Staunton's physician-in-ordinary on the yacht!

"Monsieur Justin," said de Ronski, after they had shaken hands, "permit me to present to you a great friend of mine, Monsieur Dennison, for whom I have taken the liberty of asking a share of your hospitality. But pardon," he continued, looking round at the doctor, who was staring hard at Dennison and looking as though he would very much rather be on the other side of the door. "I see you have another guest."

"Yes, yes," said Monsieur Justin. "This is Doctor Billaud, physician of the *Isolo*, the wonderful yacht of the great millionaire, Monsieur Staunton. Doctor Billaud, you, of course, know who this is?"

"Who does not?" replied Billaud, in a not over steady voice, his eyes still turning towards Dennison. He bowed, and de Ronski said:

"Mr. Dennison, of course, you know the Doctor? I believe you have already met on board the yacht?"

Dennison returned Billaud's bow and said:

"Oh, yes. I had the pleasure of meeting the Doctor at lunch to-day."

"Well, now, gentlemen," said Monsieur Justin, moving his hand towards the table, "there you have cognac and whisky, syphons and cigars; help yourselves and sit down, and we will talk."

Before they were settled Doctor Billaud turned to his host and said, with manifest nervousness:

"I wish to give no offence, Monsieur Justin, but I must remind you that I was not aware that I was to have the pleasure of meeting Monsieur Dennison to-night."

"My dear Doctor," replied his host, "any friend of Monsieur de Ronski is a friend of mine, and therefore, as long as our present satisfactory relations continue, a friend of yours."

"Then, of course, I am perfectly content," replied Billaud, sitting down and taking a gulp at the fairly stiff brandy and soda that he had mixed for himself.

"And now, doctor," continued the host, "as I have told you, you are among friends who, under certain conditions can be trusted implicitly, and, therefore, I am able to ask you to speak with perfect plainness.

"Be good enough, then, to fulfil the promise which you made to me a short time ago, and repeat in the presence of these gentlemen the very interesting narrative with which you have been kind enough to favour myself."

And then, to Dennison's utter amazement, Billaud began from the moment at which Wilfrid Ellerton was supposed to have fallen overboard from the *Isola* and told the whole story, which is already in the reader's possession, down to the moment at which he lost sight of him, and was compelled to return by the lift into the Council Chamber.

There was a little silence after he had finished, during which, with trembling hand, he raised another glass of brandy and soda which his host had poured out for him, to his pale, quivering lips, and drained it in convulsive gulps. He set the glass down with a bang and threw himself back in his

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chair, breathing hard like a man recovering himself after some intense exertion.

"Interesting, most marvellously interesting!" said de Ronski, between the puffs of his cigar. "What do you think, my dear Monsieur Dennison? Have you ever heard such a romance of tragedy as that before?"

"Never," he replied. "In fact, if I had not heard it from a gentleman of Doctor Billaud's undoubted veracity and under these particular circumstances, I should have found it quite impossible of belief."

"You will, of course, understand, gentlemen," said Billaud, pulling himself upright by the arms of his chair, and turning towards them, "that by saying what I have done to-night, I have put my life in your hands. A man's life is as nothing in the eyes of Isolo Staunton.

"I have been his slave for nearly five years now, and I have seen him send men, yes, and women, too, to instant death with a word, even for the suspicion of treason, and sometimes, to my shame and misery I say it, I have myself been compelled to execute the sentence—to make the victim ill with one drug, and, while pretending to cure, kill him with another.

"It has been horrible, and I can endure it no longer.

"But now that I have confessed all that I know, you will protect me, good Monsieur Justin, will you not?"

"I have promised," replied his host. "Keep faith and continue in what you justly call your slavery, and it shall not be long before the yoke shall be broken, and you shall be free—pardoned of everything."

"Now, how on earth was that brought about?" said Dennison to Mr. Smith as they were driving away in the brougham half an hour later. "It looks at first sight incomprehensible."

"And yet, like most seeming miracles, very easy of explanation when you know all the circumstances. When I was playing the other night I recognised Billaud as a very clever physician who got into trouble in a particularly unpleasant case in Paris about seven years ago. I was working on the case with Trapané, and when he was caught I saw him measured, on the Bertillon system. He was condemned to fifteen years, and, at the last moment by some means—a bribed official, I suppose, bought by our friend Staunton, no doubt,—he slipped through our fingers.

"He has passed the age when a man's head or features alter. He made the mistake of showing himself in the concert room clean shaven—and there you are. I sent my friend Trapané a note. He sent another to the physician of the *Isola*, making an appointment for to-night, and Billaud had either to accept it or be arrested."

TWENTY-FIFTH CHAPTER.

A Social Interlude.

As soon as Mercedes mentioned the idea of her visit to the de Ronskis to her father he at once fell in with it, saying:

"I am very glad, dearest, that you hit upon the idea of taking Miss Yuill with you to-morrow, because I happen to be very busy just now with these everlasting financial matters, and I shall have to go over to Mentone for two or three days. Indeed I was just going to tell you that I shall have to start by the first train in the morning."

"But you will not be away long, papa, will you? You

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ASK YOUR DOCTOR!

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know Lady Medcalf-Mears is only staying about a week longer, and we must have the concert before she and her party go."

"Oh, of course! Let me see. To-day is Thursday. I shall certainly be back early on Monday, and so, if it will suit the de Ronskis and everybody else that you want to ask, arrange it for Tuesday. The best thing to do will be for you and her ladyship and Cora to put your heads together and work the whole matter out. Women can arrange these things infinitely better than men, and really, as I say, I have so many business concerns to attend to that I really haven't the time to spare. Give Dinaud *carte blanche* as to the feeding and decorations and all that, and you arrange all the rest. And you know, dearest," he went on, putting his hand under her chin and turning her sweet face up to his, "the more money you spend the better I shall be pleased."

"You need not tell me that, dearest and most generous of papas!" she laughed when she had returned his kiss. "When you come back you shall find that I have been as wickedly extravagant as even you could wish, my splendid spendthrift."

The next morning she went ashore with Cora to see him off, and when they got back to the Promenade des Anglais, almost the first people they met were Madame de Ronski and Paula, escorted by the Grand Duke and Dennison.

Mercedes noticed the quick flush which rose for an instant to Cora's cheeks as she exclaimed:

"Why, there they are! Now, isn't that good! We can have the introductions right away. Heavens, how lovely that girl is. It's hardly right to let her around loose."

"Perhaps she is not the only one," laughed Mercedes softly, as they approached the party.

"Excellently well met!" exclaimed Dennison, raising his panama. The Grand Duke did the same, looking the while at Cora with eyes so full of honest admiration and something more that the momentary twinge, not of jealousy, but of half-misgiving of which her conscience accused her, instantly gave place to a mental glow of supreme content.

Dennison, as a common friend, made the introductions, and when they were completed, his Highness of Warschaua said:

"We were about going to my launch yonder to go to the yacht and beg the honour of your company at lunch at one o'clock at the London House. May I hope that you have not any other engagement?"

"No, your Highness," replied Mercedes, "we have just seen papa off to Mentone by the train. He has gone to see about some of these eternal financial matters—just as if he hadn't a great deal too much money as it is—and so I am quite free until Monday. And I don't think you have any very pressing engagements, Cora, have you?"

"Now, Miss Mercedes, you just know I haven't," laughed Cora, "and I think lunch at the London would be just delightful."

"Then that arranges itself perfectly," said the Duke, stealing another look at Cora, "and, since there is no concert to-night, and it happens to be my birthday, if Madame will continue to give us her countenance, why should we not go up afterwards to Monte Carlo, dine with Maître François, and lose a few francs at the tables by way of diversion? Ah, see who comes! It is Mr. Kesteven himself. Truly this is a morning of fortunate meetings."

"Good morning, your Highness, and——"

He stopped with his hat uplifted, looking at Paula and her mother.

"Let me have the honour, my dear Kesteven," resumed the Duke, "of presenting you to Madame and Mademoiselle de Ronski, already not unknown to you."

"I guess the honour is mostly to me, Duke," answered Kesteven, as he bowed again to the two ladies. "And now," he went on, "I want to say that I found it a trifle dull on board, and so I came ashore to see if I could find someone who would be kind enough to come and have lunch with m."

"You're just two minutes behind the procession for once in your life, poppa," laughed Cora. "It's all fixed. The Duke has just invited us to London House——"

"Then, in that case I reckon I'd better invite myself in sheer self defence," laughed her father. "Will you have me, Duke?"

"I should be obliged to send a friend to visit you, my dear Kesteven, if you had the effrontery to lunch anywhere else. It would be unheard of!" replied his Highness with mock gravity.

"Then, since that is all settled," said Madame de Ronski, "I think, Paula, that we had better go and do our shopping."

"And if we may come, too," said Mercedes, "that is just what Cora and I were going to do."

Kesteven, who was feeling on very good terms with himself and the world since he had convinced Staunton of his resolve to end the partnership, and "swindle respectably," as he put it, willingly fell in with the Duke's proposal to dine with François and spend the evening in the "gilded Gehenna," to use Miss Cora's euphemism, and so the whole party was in excellent humour when it assembled for lunch, with the sole exception of Dennison, who every time he heard Mercedes laugh felt a pang of heart-ache for pity of her sweetness and innocence.

When lunch was over Mercedes said to Cora:

"If we are going to tempt the goddess in her temple to-night I shall have to go on board and get some money or my cheque-book. I am almost penniless after the shopping. Really, the shopkeepers here are simply a set of privileged thieves."

"Don't you worry about that, Mercedes," said Kesteven quickly, "I'll be your banker for to-night. My cheque's good for a million up there, and I reckon you can't lose much more than that, and if you or Cora want any now you can have a couple of thousand francs to go on with."

He spoke carelessly, but Dennison's trained ear caught an undernote of anxiety in his voice. He thought of the thousand-franc note that Valdez had changed on the night of the first concert. He looked at Madame de Ronski and Paula, and saw that they also had caught the tone. He waited anxiously for Mercedes to speak.

"Oh, very well!" she laughed, to his intense relief, for he knew how strict a watch was being kept, and the idea of her being caught passing a counterfeit at the tables was too horrible to realise. "That is very kind of you, Uncle Dirk"—which had been her pet name for him since she was a schoolgirl—"that will be better.

"Papa told me to be as extravagant as I could while he was away, and so a few thousand francs won't matter to him. But still, I should like to go on board because I have something to say to Janet. It won't take me an hour."

"Miss Janet is the lady who nursed you during your illness, is she not?" asked Madame de Ronski. "I have heard about her. Mr. Dennison told me that you were going to bring her to call at the hotel. And Captain Iddison told me that she nursed his men during the war, and made them worship her. You will let us know her, will you not?"

"With pleasure!" exclaimed Mercedes, her eyes lighting up. "My Janet is the dearest and noblest woman alive. You will love her the moment you know her. We have nothing to do till the half-past five train, why should you not all come and have afternoon tea with me on the yacht? It will be much nicer and fresher out there than ashore."

"Do say yes, mamma," said Paula. "I am longing to see this floating palace of Mr. Staunton's."

"With the greatest pleasure. It will be delightful," assented her mother. "I am quite as curious as you are, I think."

"Then after that," laughed Mercedes, who had been unfolding the scheme of the concert during lunch, "I shall take no refusal for Tuesday. Will your Highness condescend to join us at tea?" she went on, turning to the Duke.

"Mademoiselle, I am very sorry, but I cannot," he replied

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with a despairing look towards Cora. "It would be Paradise, but I am shut out by a mere business man, a banker, with whom I must talk this afternoon, till I shall want to kill him. But this Miss Janet of whom you have spoken? I have seen her on the yacht, and, as you say, she is adorable. Do you think she would do me the honour and favour to join our party to-night?"

"Oh!" exclaimed Mercedes, leaning back in her chair and laughing so musically that some of the other people who were taking their coffee on the verandah looked up towards her. "Just fancy my good angel Janet in that sink of iniquity! Beatrice in the Inferno! I am afraid I cannot promise, your Highness, but if she will come I shall be delighted to bring her."

"You are about as good as human nature will let you be, Mercedes," said Kesteven with an almost inaudible chuckle, "but I guess that shows you are a woman after all."

"Now that's just real mean, poppa," laughed Cora. "Don't you think so, Duke?"

"No, no," he replied, returning her glance with interest, "that is a compliment. Since there is nothing in the world so adorable as woman——"

He hesitated. A swift flush which all her self-control could not command had risen to Cora's cheeks, and his instinct pulled him up short. At the same moment Cora created a happy diversion by exclaiming:

"Ah, there is papa coming! I thought he would soon be looking for his runaways. Now if you will ask him to tea, Miss Staunton, no doubt he will escort us, and then you will have him at your mercy in the matter of the concert."

De Ronski had been lunching with his friend "M. Justin" at one of the clubs. He accepted Mercedes' invitation, and in a few minutes the party broke up to meet again at the station. Kesteven excused himself and went away with his Highness, but Dennison looked at Paula and decided to go to tea.

Somewhat to Mercedes' surprise, Janet Yuill accepted the invitation to Monte Carlo almost eagerly. She had heard so much about the evilly-famous paradise of ruin and shame, and such an opportunity of seeing it would probably never come to her again, so she said. Her real reason for wishing to go would have been incredible to Mercedes, although M. de Ronski would have understood it perfectly.

The dinner at the Grand was as perfect as are all dinners for which the famous M. Francois is responsible. The oft-described Casino, the salons and the tables, with their cosmopolitan crowds of men and women, chained fast in the deadly fascination of the whirling ball and the turning cards, were revelations to Mercedes and Janet. To Madame de Ronski and Paula they were commonplaces, rather wearisome than otherwise.

They did not play. They were quite content to take Janet about the rooms and to show her the wonderful beauty of the gardens in the moonlight. As soon as the others got places Mercedes proceeded to fulfil her threat, and lost five thousand francs in almost record time. Kesteven played his usual "hard-shell game" until he won them back for her, and then stopped, giving up his place to a man behind him who had been playing with very bad luck.

"Oh, it's you, Mr. Darfield, is it?" he said as he rose and looked at him. "You've had pretty mean luck. Maybe the chair'll change it. Some of them here would give a thousand francs for it. I've broken the bank twice in it this trip."

As Darfield sat down he looked up and saw Janet standing opposite behind the little crowd on the other side of the table. She made no sign of recognition beyond the slight bow that she would have given to any ordinary acquaintance, but he could read intense anxiety in her eyes. If he could have listened to the conversation which she had just had with Dennison and the de Ronskis in the gardens, he would not only have understood, but he would have stopped playing at once, for then he would have known that, with every stake he made, he was not only playing against the bank for money, but against the Fates themselves for issues of which no amount of money could represent the vital importance.

TWENTY-SIXTH CHAPTER.

In the Casino.

Cora and the Grand Duke had got seats almost opposite to Darfield. She nodded across to him and opened a silver net bag attached to her belt by strong silver chains. The Duke saw that it was stuffed with notes and gold. He put his hand on it and said to her in a whisper:

"Miss Cora, have you the goodness to grant me a great favour?"

"Why, certainly," she replied. "What is it, Duke?"

"It is this," he murmured, his hand still resting on hers over the bag. "In my country we have a superstition that it is unlucky to tempt fortune on one's birthday. This is mine, as I have told you. Please leave your own money for the present and play with mine. I will watch. No doubt you will bring me good luck."

The idea fell in with her humour. She closed her bag with a snap, took the thick roll of notes which he offered her, and said with a flash of her eyes into his:

"With pleasure if you want me to, but don't blame me if the bank gets it all."

"It will be well lost," he replied, looking into her eyes till she dropped her lids, "if it goes through such hands as yours."

Her colour deepened, and he saw her smile as she looked down at the notes he had given her—after which he felt perfectly content to lose them to the last louis.

She picked out a thousand-franc note, saying:

"Suppose we begin with this. This is what I should have done for myself."

She put it on black. Black came up and she left the 2,000 francs on black. It turned again. She took back the original stake. Once more black came up, and now she had 6,000 francs to the good.

"Luck in threes," she whispered, and pushed the notes over to the red compartment. Red turned, and she took 6,000 francs away. Again red came up. "This can't go on," she laughed, as though she were playing with pennies, and moved the 12,000 francs (the maximum allowed at Rouge et Noir) on to the black. It turned. She took away 18,000 francs, leaving 6,000 on the black. Red came up. She put 12,000 on red and it turned again, and twice more she backed it with the maximum and won. Then she shifted to black, and in three turns she cleared 36,000 francs.

Nearly all the players had stopped, as often happens at the tables when there is a phenomenal run of luck towards a player, especially if that player be a woman—young and pretty.

Darfield, however, continued. He had followed her at first, but he went wrong the time she lost on red, and never got back into the run. He plunged again and again with the maximum until both Cora and the Grand Duke wondered how it was possible for a man in his position to sit and lose £480 at a time, as though the louis were so many shillings, but, to Janet's utter distress, it was plain that he had quite lost his head for the time being.

(Another long instalment of this serial next week.)

WHAT HANDWRITING CAN DO.

It can tell you what sort of a person you are as regards disposition and many other points that it is as well to know. If you wish for this information send a specimen of your handwriting, together with six penny stamps and a stamped addressed envelope, to Ranee, 23 Pearson's Buildings, Henrietta Street, London, W.C. You will receive in return an accurate delineation of your character which will tell you what you wish to know.

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The Symptoms of Catarrh.

The subject of catarrh is becoming of such universal interest, that the following questions have been selected as a guide for those who think they are afflicted:

Is the voice husky?
Is the nose stopped up?
Does the nose discharge?
Is the breath offensive?
Do crusts form in the nose?
Do you have sneezing spells?
Is the sonse of smell leaving?
Is there fulness in the throat?
Do you have to clear the throat?
Do you expectorate frequently?
Do you sleep with the mouth open?
Are you nauseated in the morning?
Do you have aching pains in the limbs?
Is there pain in the front of the head?
Is there dropping of phlegm in the throat?

A further explanation of the causes of these symptoms, and a more complete description of the various forms of catarrh, can be found in the last issue of **The Review of Ear, Nose and Throat Diseases.** Those who are interested can obtain a free copy of this Medical Publication by addressing The Editor, Drouet Institute, 10 Marble Arch, London, W.

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The diagram shows nine squares, with the figure 5 occupying the centre square. The puzzle is to place a different figure in each of the remaining eight squares, so that on the columns being added the result will be 15 each way. That is to say, each column will add 15 up and down, across each row, and diagonally from corner to corner. You can use the figures 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, and can place them exactly as you choose in order to obtain the result, but the figure 5 must not be removed from the centre of the square.

At first sight you may think the puzzle is much simpler than it really is. As a matter of fact, you will find it necessary to think hard and experiment a good deal before you get it correct. But it is very interesting and is surely well worth trying.

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Conducted by CYNTHIA.

[In this page are answered any letters from readers dealing with affairs of the heart, tangles in domestic life, or points of etiquette. All communications must be addressed to Miss Cynthia Hamilton, c/o the Editor of SHORT STORIES.*]*

Marrying a French Girl.

"I AM about to go and live in France for several years," writes "D. U. R.," "and my people are chaffing me and warning me not to fall in love with a French lady and marry her. Of course I don't know what my love affairs may be, but supposing I should fall in love with a French girl, would it be an inadvisable marriage?"

* * * * *

If "D. U. R." falls in love with a French girl, he is to be envied, as marriages between our two countries, in cases that one knows, have been very happy ones indeed. The British and French are so different in character and temperament, that a couple might be exceedingly happy together. French women are as a rule very womanly and graceful, and full of outward charm, and likely to appeal to the more stolid Briton. At the same time, I do not counsel "D. U. R." to deliberately forsake his own countrywomen. I am only supposing that he may fall in love with a French girl, as he says, and should he do so, I do not see why he should not marry her.

Two Broken Engagements.

I HAVE received two letters from readers, one of which seems to provide the answer to the other. It is a story of broken engagements. Firstly there is "SOUTH AFRICA," who tells me the following tale of woe: "I was engaged to a girl for two years until the other day, when, without knowing what I was doing, I broke it off with her, and offended her parents. I am still madly in love with her, and try to forget it, but cannot. Neither she nor her parents will now have anything to do with me."

* * * * *

Before I answer this, I will just quote "J. O.'s" letter. He says: "I used to walk out with a girl who had a rather hasty temper. We quarrelled over another girl, and she told me she never wished to see my face again. Her mother has written to me since, and wants me to go and see the girl, and explain matters, as she seems much upset about it. I don't know what to do, as I *do not care for her now.*"

* * * * *

"J. O.'s" last words probably hit off both his own position and that of "SOUTH AFRICA." Both of them have quarrelled with their sweethearts, and used hasty words. Both sweethearts have taken mortal offence and refuse to be reconciled. Well, that is not surprising. When one's feelings have been deeply wounded—the love one has had for another may be completely destroyed. The only healer is time. I have often said that I do not believe very much in mere spoken apologies after a deep offence, but I think that, if a couple are really in love, time will sooner or later force them back again to each other.

Meeting in the Street.

"GIRLIE." You are sixteen, and you often see a boy whom you would like to know, but know nobody who could introduce you. Would it be forward of you to speak to him as you pass him in the street? You think he would speak to you if you made the start.

* * * * *

Certainly, it would be forward for you to do so. I don't think if I were you I should speak to him. After all, if he very much wishes to know you, he will find some way of getting the introduction.

Christmas Proposals.

"Is Christmas a good time to 'pop the question'?" asks "GEORGE." "I am very fond of a girl, and have often visited her people, but have not yet said anything, as I doubt whether her father thinks I am well-enough off. Should I propose at Christmas, or would it be better to postpone it?"

* * * * *

Christmas is a very good time indeed to propose. If you are visiting the family during the festivities, and the time seems ripe for a proposal, you should take advantage of the prevailing goodwill to perform the dread task. But be careful to catch papa before he gets his Christmas bills sent in. That is usually a very bad time for the proposing young man.

The Art of Talking.

"WHEN one is in conversation with a lady," writes "T. E.," "ought one to always address her by her name, or simply say 'yes,' and 'no,' as the case may be? Do you know of any book dealing with such matters?"

* * * * *

It would be very foolish to repeat a lady's name with every fresh remark. Mention it occasionally, if it seems necessary in giving your sentence a finish, but do not do it in an obsequious way, as that makes a man ridiculous. The art of polite conversation is to make your phrases sound polished, even if there is no particular sense in them. A book will not teach you such an act, which is inborn, and I should not recommend any man to study conversation from a book, unless I wished him to develop into a hopeless prig. Just talk to a girl naturally, and she will like you all the better for it.

Quarrel Between Brothers.

"S. E. F." tells me of a serious family quarrel, and asks if I can advise a settlement of it. Two sons of a friend of his have had words, in which the elder said something to the younger which he will not forgive unless there is an apology. Some months have now elapsed since the row, with no signs of reconciliation. The elder brother is three years older than the other. "S. E. F." wishes to know how the parents could deal with such a matter.

* * * * *

I am afraid that such quarrels between brothers are very frequent, and more difficult to reconcile than ordinary quarrels between friends. If an estrangement once sets in a family the chances are against peace. I fear, too, that an apology so late in the day could not have the desired result. Perhaps after a while the two brothers will see that this estrangement is very foolish, and will agree to shake hands and forget the whole affair, regardless of the rights and wrongs. An apology usually means that one or other is humiliated, and that feeling is one which rankles. Forgetfulness will be the best cure for the quarrel in question.

Cynthia

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